

# The Monastery – Part 3: The Song of God

---

No foreigner will ever write the English language as well as the native Englishman, and the ideas, when put in good English, will spread farther than in Hindu English.

Swami Vivekananda<sup>1</sup>

## The Challenge of Translation of Sacred Literature

Now I shall tell you  
That innermost secret:  
Knowledge of God  
Which is nearer than knowing  
Bhagavad Gita Chapter 9

When writing a cake recipe, one deals with words that identify concrete objects and precise quantities: ¼ lb. of butter is ¼ lb. of butter; 1 cup of milk is 1 cup of milk (or 237 milliliters). Literal communication is easy and necessary. Likewise, when creating instructions for assembling an IKEA bookshelf Part A goes into Part B. You don't even need words; a simple diagram is enough. Success is guaranteed. But what about the experience of God-realization and the subsequent how-to instructions to enable the reader to ultimately share that experience? Words fail us at the very outset; the experience itself is widely recognized by those who have been there as ineffable, beyond words, so that putting it into words is already a distortion. God is never captured by the mind in a cage of words, so how is religious insight communicated? It's a marvel that word-dependent attempts have any success at all.

The challenge is magnified when attempting to communicate inspirational literature in translation. A merely serviceable yet awkward word for word equating of denotation simply doesn't sing. It is not easily absorbed by the mind, which has to labor to get at the meaning, actually mentally completing a translation into natural English on the fly, to bring it to full term. This is a distraction with written word and a more serious impediment to communication in live speech, which rolls right along, ready or not. If a work is originally brilliant, sparkling with wisdom, beauty, and intelligence, the translation must match the native mastery of expression. Moreover, the translator should have the spiritual insight to understand what the words are trying to get at. To combine this spiritual authority with a sufficiently profound familiarity of connotation and cultural subtlety in both tongues is rare. A bridge between true mastery of the two languages may be needed, and this is where Chris comes in.

The import of the Bhagavad Gita

Prabhavananda and Isherwood expressed themselves eloquently in the Translators' Preface "...the *Gita* is a gospel. Its essential message is timeless. In words that belong

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Dr. Nanjunda Rao. From England: July 14, 1896. Complete Works, 5. 108.

to no one language, race or epoch, incarnate God speaks to man, His friend. Here, the translator must forget all about Vedanta philosophy and Sanskrit terms; all about India and the West, Krishna and Arjuna, past and future. He must aim at the utmost simplicity.

“...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 preserved by university professors. It has something to say, urgently, to every one of us.”

Swami had originally drawn Isherwood into the monastery to work on a translation of the Bhagavad Gita. It was to be the first of many collaborations between the two. Prabhavananda valued the contribution of Western writers. He told Swami Chetanananda, his hand-picked Assistant Swami, who would go on to both translate and write many English-language books,<sup>2</sup> “Chetanananda, you write or translate, but it must be edited by the Westerners. It is their language...”

But Prabhavananda’s original motivation was not to create a literary gem or make the Gita more Westerner-friendly. We will read that while reviewing a new translation, he felt that the spiritual import of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, The Yoga of Devotion, was not adequately communicated.

A foundational creative decision, to opt for a vibrant read, was well-established by the elders of the Ramakrishna movement. We quote from [The History and Impact of the Swami Prabhavananda – Christopher Isherwood Bhagavad Gita Translation.](#)<sup>3</sup>

Both Swami Turiyananda and Maharaj [Swami’s guru, Swami Brahmananda] taught that the *Gita* is a vital, even interactive life companion, to be embraced by the individual’s whole and constant being...

Swami Prabhavananda had asked Swami Turiyananda to teach him how to study the *Gita*. Turiyananda advised him to take one verse at a time, meditate on its meaning, and live the verse for a week before going on to the next verse. In that way he was to study the entire *Gita*.

Prabhavananda dedicates this translation to Turiyananda: “To the memory of SWAMI TURIYANANDA who was regarded by his master SRI RAMAKRISHNA as a perfect embodiment of that renunciation which is taught in the BHAGAVAD-GITA.”

The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation doesn’t include the traditional commentaries, which are commonly found in almost all other translations. ‘Swami Yogeshananda...had an entry in his monk’s notebook where Swami

---

<sup>2</sup> English-language [books by Swami Chetanananda](https://vedantastl.org/product-category/books-by-swami-chetanananda/) <https://vedantastl.org/product-category/books-by-swami-chetanananda/>

<sup>3</sup> An overlapping but different account [The History and Impact of the Swami Prabhavananda – Christopher Isherwood Bhagavad Gita Translation](#) by Jon Monday can be read at the American Vedantist website June 15, 2018.

Prabhavananda describes Swami Brahmananda's advice about how to approach the *Gita*.

In our monasteries, both in India and in the West, the *Bhagavad Gita* is, of course, a principal text for pedagogy and study. Swami Brahmananda, first President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, said to some of that early group of young men, "Let your first reading of the *Gita* be without commentary."

Swami Saradananda says in his book *The Essence of the Gita*: "It is not necessary for you to study all those commentaries. Your minds are not yet influenced by any particular philosophy and they are, so to speak, still fresh. It is enough to understand the meaning as it reveals itself to you spontaneously."

Prabhavananda explains that they consulted the writings of three of the greatest commentators, but wishing to avoid bulky and distracting footnotes that interrupt the flow of the discourse, they incorporated any required explanations within the text itself.

Chris mentions working on the translation throughout 1943, but in November of that year, the work gained momentum. We relate two first-person accounts of the events, the process, and the impetus, both Swami Prabhavananda's and Christopher Isherwood's. They present unique perspectives and differ slightly from one another in that Prabhavananda attributes more stylistic suggestions to Huxley than does Isherwood, which demonstrates the uncertain nature of histories, even first-person accounts.

Here are Swami Prabhavananda's comments about how the translation came about:<sup>4</sup>

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." Then Aldous told Chris which style to use for verse.<sup>5</sup> Chris rewrote the whole eleventh chapter of the *Gita* following Tennyson, I think. He produced the book in a week. He was inspired."

Here is how Isherwood describes the artistic breakthrough:

---

<sup>4</sup> As recorded by Pravrajika Anandaprana, Prabhavananda's longtime personal secretary, in her first memoir distributed privately after Prabhavananda's death (late 1970s). Much of the material has since been released as *A Light to the West*, edited by Pravrajika Brahma-prana. This anecdote is recorded on page 113 in both books.

<sup>5</sup> That Huxley dictated or suggested verse style is not mentioned in Isherwood's recollection of the process.

November 22, 1943: After much hesitation, Peggy confessed that she thinks our version really isn't much better than any of the others. It's dull and it's clumsy and it reeks of Sanskrit. What's more, she's already talked to Aldous (who's seen some of it) and he agrees. It was an awful moment, because, once she'd said it, it was only too obvious. I felt a wave of depression sweep over me—and Swami, seeing how I felt, suddenly turned very small and grey and shrivelled, a bird on a winter bough. And then—it was really amazing—I saw, in a flash, what was wrong. I went to my room with the manuscript. Our version began:

Oh changeless Krishna, drive my chariot between the two armies who are eager for battle, that I may see those whom I shall have to fight in this coming war. I wish to see the men who have assembled here, taking the side of the enemy in order to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra.

In about a half an hour, I had turned this into:

    Krishna the changeless,  
    Halt my chariot  
    There where the warriors,  
    Bold for the battle,  
    Face their foemen.  
    Between the armies  
    There let me see them  
    The men I must fight with, Gathered together  
    Now at the bidding  
    Of him their leader,  
    Blind Dhritarashtra's  
    Evil offspring:  
    Such are my foes  
    In the war that is coming...

I brought this back and showed it to Swami and Peggy, and they were both very excited. I'm excited myself—because it opens up all sorts of possibilities. I now realize how horribly bored I was with the old translation. I don't see my way clearly, yet, but obviously this method can be applied throughout the book. There should be several kinds of verse, including, maybe, some hexameters; and I think I can vary the prose style too. We are going to Aldous this evening, to discuss the whole thing with him.

December 9, 1943: Since our decision, the revised Gita has been going ahead as if by magic. I've never worked so hard. The whole thing seems to be already in my head: It's as though I'd been secretly assembling it there, like an invading army, all these months. Unfortunately—perhaps due to the strain and excitement—I've started smoking again, more than ever. At first it made me sick to my stomach, but I kept right at it.<sup>6</sup>

Isherwood also clarifies 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

---

<sup>6</sup> Isherwood, *Diaries, Volume One*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (Henceforth V1) 328-30

should have felt that every moment of it was worthwhile. For the slow, thoroughgoing 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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

Until the manuscript was completed, Chris stayed on the temple grounds; he didn't want to be physically separated from Swami.

## Emergence

The book's association with Aldous Huxley and Christopher helped to bring it to the public's attention, being an incentive for both Marcel Rodd to publish and *Time Magazine* to write an article upon its publication.

June 20, 1944: Marcel Rodd is going to take over the distribution, and publish the next edition...He's a strange, pale, little shrimp of a man, with great dark eyes, full of a sort of sly, boyish impudence. He's English—with Levantine blood; a Jew, I think. He makes Swami become much more Oriental than usual: they meet, as it were, at a halfway house in the Near East, and sit bargaining and giggling, understanding each other perfectly.

In January, 1945, a writer from *Time Magazine* came to the temple and interviewed Swami and Chris. At the time, even though many translations already existed, the general public knew almost nothing about the Gita. The article was released in February 1945 (see original article<sup>9</sup>). It praised the Gita translation, calling it "a distinguished literary work." Isherwood writes of the article and the Family's response:

The mistakes made by the writer—no more and no fewer than were to be expected—all became household jokes. There was the "alabaster" temple, the "small house" in which four men and eight women live "monastically," the robe which "sweeps to the floor," the "dispassionate" ceremony (whatever that might mean) which lasts just over ten minutes, three times a day.

---

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree*, ed. Robert Adjemian, (Harper & Row) 1986, 182-183.

<sup>8</sup> Volume 1, 29

<sup>9</sup> See the original article: <http://mondaymedia.org/AVTime.pdf>

Swami joined in our laughter, but he was perfectly satisfied with what had been written. He didn't take offense at the three adjectives used to describe him—"slight," "agreeable," "cigaret-smoking"—which I read as a condescending put-down. He found it no more than my due that the writer had featured me as the star of the Vedanta Society. The publicity didn't repel him, it made him prouder of me. On such occasions he was truly a father.<sup>10</sup>

However, the Time reporter included a popular speculation concerning Chris and *The Razor's Edge*. John Yale (Swami Vidyatmananda) 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."

However, Maugham would have been a better judge as to whether Larry was, at least in part, our Chris. Moreover, it seems that Chris and Larry have much more substantive qualities in common—young men with the world at their feet who opt to renounce—than the dissimilarities of geographical origins or professions.

## The Takeaway

The journal ends for five years on December 31, 1944. It would resume on December 26, 1949. This is that last entry, New Year's Eve 1944:

Something has happened. Or rather, nothing has happened but I accept that nothing. Suddenly, I feel quite calm. Sure, I ought to stop seeing X., or leave Ivar Avenue, or both. I ought either to get a movie job or start a new story. But the whole problem—just because it seems insoluble at present—has to be accepted for what it is, and simply offered up. I'll let it develop and try to stop worrying. Sooner or later—probably much sooner—X. will go away. Sooner or later, I shall write another story, or get work, or money, or go East or to England. Nothing that is happening or may happen really prevents me from doing the one thing which ultimately matters. Make japam, watch and wait. Put all your emphasis upon that. Everything—even your scruples about your conduct—is vanity, in the last analysis. Never mind what other people think of you. Never mind what you think of yourself. Go ahead with the only valid activity, the one which never fails. Stop trying to tidy up your life. Stop making vows—you'll only break them. Less fussing

---

<sup>10</sup> My Guru 182-3

and more faith. You've been an awful nuisance lately, but I forgive you. No, don't thank me. No more tears, I beg. Blow your nose, and pull up your socks, and shut up. You don't have to be a grim old stoic, either. Your life could be such fun. Now run along and enjoy yourself. And let's try to make this a happy new year.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the nearly two years in the monastery, Chris had been looking for commercial writing work but hadn't succeeded in finding any. Soon after the publishing of the Gita and resultant *Time Magazine* publicity, Isherwood was offered and accepted a job at Warner Brothers Studios. It was as though his mission was complete and he was being released. 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."<sup>12</sup>

Soon Isherwood would leave the monastery and the X. affair would end abruptly. But in looking back on his monastic experience and whether he should have left the monastery sooner, Isherwood wrote:

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.<sup>13</sup>

Religion for Isherwood was overwhelmingly personal as unassumingly laid bare in the following:

...why do I believe in God? Not for any reason that would sound well in a sermon. I have had no visions, or revelations, or direct experience—except of the most cloudy and untrustworthy kind. No, I believe in the belief of others—that's all, and yet it's more than enough. I don't mean the belief that the saints had...I mean that a man I have actually met—the Swami—believes in God so entirely, so simply, so calmly, so intelligently and so lovingly, that I am bound to say, in all my quite large experience of human beings, disbelief has never produced a representative one quarter as convincing.<sup>14</sup>

While Isherwood confesses to having no revelations, his decades of commitment to Prabhavananda imply a reward different from what we come to expect from the guru/disciple relationship. It was an end in itself. At first glance, Chris' relationship to Swami may look like simply guru bhakti. Of Prabhavananda's extraordinary guru bhakti, Isherwood wrote:

"This house belongs to Maharaj. Maharaj is watching over it, over all of you. I can do nothing on my own. I am only his servant." This is what Prabhavananda would tell me...

You could say that his belief in the presence and protection of Brahmananda was all the religion he needed...

---

<sup>11</sup> Volume 1 379

<sup>12</sup> My Guru 185

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 188

<sup>14</sup> Volume 1 284

Could I pretend to understand what such a devotion must mean? No. My own experience of relationships was so different and so inferior. I couldn't help thinking of any sort of love relationship as a bargain struck between two parties...but they could never regard it as absolutely firm. Neither one of the parties could be trusted not to violate it at any moment without warning...

Prabhavananda explained that Brahmananda didn't love others in this person-to-person way. Having realized God, who is love, he had become love. Those who came into this presence felt that love; he gave forth love while remaining incapable of possessiveness or jealousy.

I could understand this statement as an intellectual proposition; emotionally it was unintelligible to me.<sup>15</sup>

But the Prabhavananda/Isherwood relationship has an extra component. Isherwood enjoyed an exceptional ease with Swami, like that of a favored son who is loved unconditionally and can do no wrong. The father/son bond is expressed by both of them repeatedly throughout their lives.

February 28, 1944: Swami has been sick. Now he's recovered. He sits on the sofa and we forget him. We play, unmindful like children, in the completely uninteresting certainty of their father's love. If we cut our fingers, we'll remember and run to him at once. It isn't a relationship because there's no element of surprise, no possibility of change. He could not cease to care for us. Our demand on him is total and quite merciless. Of course he is and will be there—now, tomorrow, whenever we decide we want him.<sup>16</sup>

At the conclusion of *The Writer and Vedanta*, a talk Chris gave at the Hollywood Temple, Swami Prabhavananda's closing words were simply, "I'll just make a short remark. I feel like a proud father." (Listen to the sound clip here: <http://www.mondaymedia.org/SPF.mp3>)

So what did Chris take away to sustain his spiritual life? From continuing to read his journals, it's obvious that his meditation and japam didn't sustain him or vice versa. It was rather his lifelong devotion to and continued association with his guru that carried him

Isherwood left the monastery in late 1944/early 1945. But Prabhavananda's ambition for him was relentless. Four years later, on March 1, 1949, Chris' journal entry reads: "Swami still keeps a room in the other house...which he says is for me. It rather scares me—the way he waits."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> My Guru 40-41

<sup>16</sup> V1 335

<sup>17</sup> V1 409