

PART 6 - POST MONASTERY: LIFESTYLE AS A LAY DEVOTEE

Whatever path men travel
Is my path:
No matter where they walk
It leads to me.

Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God, Chapter 4

This implication of the above introductory passage is very bold. In many Gita translations or when it is paraphrased from the pulpit, there is often a caveat: "As long as you don't..." Prabhavananda's declaration is unconditional, indicating that Maya is set up in such a way that ultimately there is no escaping God-Realization. As we've seen, at the point where Chris's continued monastic career was in doubt, Prabhavananda put this conviction even more bluntly: "Even if you eat mud, you will be alright." This perspective helps explain Prabhavananda's apparent liberalism. It is predicated on the belief that we have all the time we need, are, in fact, trapped, as the bound soul is repeatedly reborn, subject to "the wheel of birth and death,"¹ the sole deliverance from this wheel being God-Realization. The question that challenges us—how long do you want to eat mud?

After the monastery, Isherwood's lifestyle returned to his normal—writing for vocation, writing for money, and social life, but also regular visits to Swami and selfless contributions to the burgeoning Vedanta literature for the West. In fairness, the following journal entry should be taken as Isherwood in the depths of a funk, stalled in inactivity while slogging through the dregs of a relationship that had outlived that new car smell. It's not representative of his everyday state of mind since leaving the monastery but does expose the role that religious life has assumed in the self-flagellation loop his mind would replay throughout his life. But ahead of him are a long-term committed relationship with artist Don Bachardy till death did them part and a satisfying stint teaching English,

March 6, 1951 It comes to me, again and again, how I have deteriorated into a dull-witted selfish useless creature—most shameful failure, since I asked the way to God, was shown it, and then didn't take it. Even now (but for how much longer?) Swami stands ready to help me if I'll even raise one finger. But I won't. I won't go live at Trabuco.

April 27, 1951 Thy will be done—how often must I say it?

Every day, every hour, every moment. What I really am trying to run away from is myself. What I am trying to impose—under the guise of "reasonableness"—is my own will. "Nothing burns in hell except the self" and I am miserable because the self is burning. In the simplest, most terrible manner I am being taught that no other kind of life is possible for me. The monastery in *here*, is wherever I am. When Swami said: "Ramakrishna will hound you," he wasn't kidding²

And yet how merciful life has been to me....

¹ Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 4

² Swami often lectured on *The Hound of Heaven*.

...Never mind how far I've fallen back from what I once seemed to know so clearly. As long as I struggle, I'll never be lost. I can start every instant. This very instant.³

SWAMI VIDYATMANANDA

As we've noted, there were no published diary entries for roughly five years after leaving the monastery. At the time the entries start again, 1949, we have a secondary source for Isherwood's Vedanta biography: John Yale. While we've already cited John Yale,⁴ Isherwood does not meet Yale until this point in his life, his post-monastic period. We introduce him now in more depth. Yale, having been a successful publisher in Chicago prior to his joining the monastery, took on the building up of the Society's bookshop, mail order, and publishing businesses.

Yale writes about Isherwood at length in his memoir [The Making of a Devotee](#).⁵ He was both an eye witness and confidante;⁶ and they successfully and harmoniously worked together on literary projects for the Society for many years, Yale being the longtime editor of the Society's publication *Vedanta and the West*. Here are Yale's impressions of Isherwood:

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 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

³ Vol 1, p 434-435.

⁴ Later Brahmachari Prema Chaitanya and ultimately Swami Vidyatmanand. For simplicity, we will refer to him as John Yale unless context dictates otherwise.

⁵ ⁵ The memoir consists of chapters in pdf format with no page breaks. To go back to the source, I suggest Googling chunks of text to view a quote in context or in greater depth.

⁶ 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)

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 only continues to grow. 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.



John Yale doing dishes in the Hollywood kitchen
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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.

Yale also wrote in *The Making of a Devotee* of a later incident: "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: 'Prema, remember this: always love Chris.'"⁷

Let's also cite Isherwood's early reaction to Yale dated 1956 when the two became close:

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.⁸

Concerning the culmination of the relationship, Yale writes:

Chris sometimes even assumed an almost devotional attitude toward me. He delighted in the "success" I had attained in being able to take sannyas. He often proclaimed that I, as a formerly worldly American who had become a Ramakrishna swami, would become an inspiring example to others. Such was Chris's generous heart. Here is how he expressed himself on October 22, 1963:

Well bless you, Prema dear — or rather, bless me. You will be one of the few Swamis I could take the dust of the feet of...and "mean" it, because you have really been through something which I can appreciate and measure the tremendousness of. It wasn't easy, I know!⁹

⁷ Swami Vidyatmananda, [The Making of a Devotee](#), Chapter 5. This also shows up in Chris' Diary. Page 785. Chris quotes Swami as having said, according to Yale, "Always love Chris. He's a great devotee." Diaries, Vol. 1, p. 785.

⁸ *My Guru*, 215-216

⁹ Swami Vidyatmananda, [The Making of a Devotee](#), Chapter 5