

PART 7 – THE WRITER & VEDANTA

The greatness of a teacher consists in the simplicity of his language. ¹

THE PRABHAVANANDA/ISHERWOOD LITERARY COLLABORATIONS

Over Prabhavananda's long tenure as founding head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, he taught a variety of classic Vedanta scriptures and spiced the teachings with reminiscences of associations with the disciples and associates of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. He generally used his own translations of the classical source materials, even though many translations were already in circulation; and he also published a body of works of his associations with the holy, incorporating the reliable first-hand reminiscences of his peers with his own considerable experiences. In the course of reading Isherwood's Diaries, we see that Swami Prabhavananda frequently asked for Chris' editorial input on his writings from very early in their relationship; as Swami Yogeshananda has told us, Swami was eager for the input of experts in many fields. Isherwood soon became his most frequent partner in the formal literary collaborations.

They developed a voice characterized by a lean elegance. As Yogeshananda writes, "Those who take even a sample of the fruit of this prodigious labor [Prabhavananda's writings] must be struck by the simplicity of the Swami's style, the total absence of academic pretension and literary conceits." He made a similar comment about Prabhavananda's class work, With the scripture classes [for monastics] "he was never academic or unnecessarily erudite in Sanskrit, but rather he attempted to place each point in a setting the Western student could appreciate and identify with." ² That this simplicity was a stylistic choice is supported by a statement Prabhavananda once made while speaking from the pulpit. In the 1970s he read a passage he had written many years past and then, interrupting the flow of his thought, excused the flowery prose, saying he had written it during his "Shakespeare period."

The basic concept perfected during the Gita collaboration—making the translation palatable to the Western mind while retaining the work's spiritual integrity—was the guiding principle going forward.

Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* (*Crest Jewel of Discrimination*)

The *Vivekachudamani* is a classic text expounding the philosophy of non-dualism and was the collaboration following the Bhagavad Gita. From a literary standpoint, it was much more straightforward than the Gita. In writing of the process, Isherwood's words reveal a reverence for the holiness of the text itself:

...it was easy to tell myself that I was unworthy of my task. Puritanism tempted the ego to assert itself in the role of Outcast Sinner, just when I should have been ignoring it

¹ Swami Vivekananda, Letter to Alasinga Perumal, Boston: March 23, 1896. Complete Works, 5. 106.

² Swami Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows*, p. 58

completely. This wasn't a question of being worthy or unworthy³ but of having the necessary literary skill. I had it, so what was there to worry about? It is arguable that...a spiritual teacher may lose credibility because his way of life contradicts what he teaches. But here it was Shankara, the impeccable, who was doing the teaching; I was merely his scribe.⁴

Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali (How to Know God)

After the Crest Jewel collaboration, Chris and Swami worked on *Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms, How to Know God*.

Literarily speaking, this was an altogether different challenge than either the Gita or Crest Jewel. It is described in the Translators' Preface:

The simplest meaning of the word sutra is "thread." A sutra is, so to speak, the bare thread of an exposition, the absolute minimum that is necessary to hold it together, unadorned by a single "bead" of elaboration. Only essential words are used. Often, there is no complete sentence-structure. There was a good reason for this method. Sutras were composed at a period when there were no books. The entire work had to be memorized, and so it had to be expressed as tersely as possible. Patanjali's Sutras, like all others, were intended to be expanded and explained. The ancient teachers would repeat an aphorism by heart and then proceed to amplify it with their own comments, for the benefit of their pupils. In some instances these comments, also, were memorized, transcribed at a later date, and thus preserved for us.

In this translation we have not only provided a commentary but expanded and paraphrased the aphorisms themselves, so that each one becomes an intelligible statement in the English language. Certain other translators have been unwilling to take this liberty, and have therefore offered a version of the text which is approximately literal, but as cryptic as a professor's lecture notes. It cannot be understood at all until its commentary has been carefully studied. We believe that this kind of translation has a bad psychological effect on the reader. Being, at first glance, unable to make anything of the aphorisms themselves, he is apt to decide that the whole subject is too difficult for him. Enough difficulties exist anyway in the study of yoga philosophy. It has been our aim not to increase them unnecessarily.

Our commentary is mainly our own work. However, we have followed the explanations of the two ancient commentators, Bhoja and Vyasa. We have also quoted frequently from the brilliant and deeply intuitive comments of Swami Vivekananda. These comments were made extempore during the classes on Patanjali which the Swami held in the United States...

They go on to write that they present this book as "a practical aid to spiritual life that can be used by devotees of any religion."⁵ In a session where the subtitle was being brainstormed,

³ When we were newbie devotees, a more seasoned devotee told us that when she first came, she hesitated to ask for an appointment with Swami. He asked what had taken her so long. She answered that she hadn't felt worthy. He countered, "So you're worthy now?"

⁴ My Guru 192

⁵ George Harrison used a passage in his final album:

Isherwood sardonically suggested “How to Know God,” how-to books being all the rage at that time, the early 1950s. To his shock and mild horror, the others liked it and it stuck.⁶

Isherwood also writes of the process: “Comment inspires comment...I found myself writing for an audience of my own, those of my friends who knew almost nothing about Vedanta and needed to have Patanjali explained to them in Occidental terms. Through all this, I had the support of Swami’s approval⁷[We see this desire to introduce his community throughout his Vedanta work]...When I typed out the title page of Patanjali I wrote ‘by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood,’ and Swami said ‘Why put and, Chris? It separates us.’”⁸

PRECIOUS GEMS POLISHED TO BRILLIANCE BY EVERYDAY WEAR

Prabhavananda translated Vedic chants which were frequently used to introduce and conclude classes and lectures. In his diary, Isherwood writes of reviewing some of this text. Yogeshananda writes, “He [Prabhavananda] favored our using the English language for chants and songs, retaining however, the traditional Sanskrit vesper service used throughout the world. Even for these hymns he wanted translations made.”⁹

He translated both the instructions and mantras for ritual worship, which were practiced by both lay and monastic disciples with his permission. Of Prabhavananda’s approach to worship, Yogeshananda writes, “There was an element of freedom, a joy in spontaneity in the way Swami did the worship and taught others to do it. The expression of one’s own inner feeling was what was wanted.” Isherwood wrote highly of the value of worship performance while a monk.

Prabhavananda and Isherwood created notable translations for two short pieces, a hymn of adoration to Sri Ramakrishna composed by his intimate disciple, Swami Vivekananda, and a prayer by Chaitanya, a great lover of God. Both of these pieces are used on a regular, even daily, basis in Vedanta Centers in the West, especially those associated with the Vedanta Society of Southern California. Many devotees have committed both to memory, not necessarily by design but as a natural result of daily repetition.

Khandana Bhava Bhandana

Khandana Bhava Bandhana is a hymn with Bengali lyrics¹⁰ written by Swami Vivekananda in adoration of Sri Ramakrishna. It is sung regularly in Vedanta Centers around the world as a vespers hymn. The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation is known as *Breaker of This World’s Chain*, which absent music becomes a free-standing poem rather than song lyric. Some centers

⁶ According to Swami Yogeshananda, it was Chris who settled on the How-to title; but Isherwood’s own statement should be the final word.

⁷ *Ibid* 195

⁸ *Ibid* 206

⁹ Yogesh 60

¹⁰ According to Swami Chetanananda, “...someone asked Swamiji about the language used in this vesper song, that the composition is neither Sanskrit nor Bengali. What language is it? Swamiji answered that most of the words are in plain, simple Sanskrit, which is close to chaste or elegant Bengali. The verbs are in Bengali...”

both sing the song *Kandana Bhava Bandhana* and recite *Breaker* or another English translation. In Southern California centers and their associate centers, both the song and recitation are a part of the evening vesper service. This is the Prabhavananda/Isherwood translation, reproduced in full by permission of Vedanta Press:

Breaker of This World's Chain¹¹

Breaker of this world's chain, we adore Thee, whom all men love.
Spotless, taking man's form, O Purifier, Thou art above the gunas three,
Knowledge divine, not flesh; Thou whom the cosmos wears, a diamond at its heart.

Let us look deep in Thine eyes; they are bright with the wisdom of God,
That can wake us from maya's spell.
Let us hold fast to Thy feet, treading the waves of the world to safety.
Oh, drunk with love, God-drunken Lover, in Thee all paths of all yogas meet.

Lord of the worlds, Thou art ours, who wert born a child of our time; easy of access to us.
O Merciful, if we take any hold upon God in our prayer, it is by Thy grace alone,
Since all Thine austerities were practiced for our sake.

How great was Thy sacrifice, freely choosing Thy birth in this prison, our Iron Age,
To unchain us and set us free.
Perfect, whom lust could not taint, nor passion nor gold draw near,
O Master of all who renounce, fill our hearts full of love for Thee.

Thou hast finished with fear and with doubt, standing firm in the vision of God;
Refuge to all who have cast fame, fortune, and friends away.
Without question Thou shelterest us, and the world's great sea in its wrath
Seems shrunk to the puddle that fills the hoofprint in the clay.

Speech cannot hold Thee, nor mind, yet without Thee we think not nor speak.
Love, who art partial to none, we are equal before Thy sight.
Taker-away of our pain, we salute Thee, though we are blind.
Come to the heart's black cave, and illumine, Thou light of the light.

As the *Khandana* is so widely-recited, there are many English-language translations. As the piece is short and other translations are easily found online, I encourage the reader to find a few and compare them to the Prabhavananda/Isherwood translation to better evaluate the quality of their contribution.

Chaitanya's Prayer

Chaitanya was a 15th Century Bengali spiritual luminary who advocated ecstatic love of God as the means and the end to Liberation. Some consider him a saint, some a re-incarnation of Krishna, some a partial incarnation; or, most uniquely, some consider him a re-incarnation of both Radha and Krishna, uniting the mutual lover and beloved in one body in the person of

¹¹ Printed by permission of Vedanta Press, All Rights Reserved

Chaitanya. While soaked in devotion, Chaitanya's biography yields a more complex relationship to the Divine. In his early life, Chaitanya was a noted pundit and logician but was transformed by spiritual illumination. He renounced his erudition and became a practitioner and advocate of ecstatic love for God. However, his mantra is Tat Twam Asi, a Mahavakya expressing the non-dualistic realization. This could be an intimation that Chaitanya advocated the practice of maintaining some separation from total absorption in order to be able to feel love for God, to taste sugar rather than be sugar. The Prabhavananda-Isherwood translation of Chaitanya's Prayer first appeared in *Vedanta for the Western World* in 1946 and is presented in full here by permission of Vedanta Press as it appears in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*.¹²

A PRAYER¹³

by
Sri Caitanya

Chant the name of the Lord and His glory unceasingly
That the mirror of the heart may be wiped clean
And quenched that mighty forest fire,
Worldly lust, raging furiously within.
Oh Name, stream down in moonlight on the lotus-heart,
Opening its cup to knowledge of Thyself.
O self, drown deep in the waves of His bliss,
Chanting His Name continually,
Tasting His nectar at every step,
Bathing in His Name, that bath for weary souls.

Various are Thy Names, Oh Lord,
In each and every Name Thy power resides.
No times are set, no rites are needful, for chanting of Thy Name,
So vast is Thy mercy.
How huge, then is my wretchedness,
Who find, in this empty life and heart,
No devotion to Thy Name!

Oh, my mind,
Be humbler than a blade of grass,
Be patient and forbearing like the tree,
Take no honor to thyself,
Give honor to all,
Chant unceasingly the Name of the Lord.

¹²Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p. 331, Reprinted with permission of Vedanta Press, 1946 Vedanta Place, Hollywood, CA 90068

¹³ According to the footnote in *Spiritual Heritage of India*, this piece was originally published in *Vedanta for the Western World* (Christopher Isherwood, ed., New York: Viking Press 1960; London, Allen & Unwin 1948), p. 225. However the collection was originally printed in 1946, published by The Marcel Rodd Company, who also did the first printing of the Prabhavananda/Isherwood Bhagavad Gita.

Oh Lord and Soul of the Universe,
Mine is no prayer for wealth or retinue,
The playthings of lust or the toys of fame;
As many times as I may be reborn
Grant me, Oh Lord, a steadfast love for Thee.

A drowning man in this world's fearful ocean
Is Thy servant, O Sweet One.
In Thy mercy
Consider him as dust beneath Thy feet.

Ah, how I long for the day
When, in chanting Thy Name, the tears will spill down
From my eyes, and my throat will refuse to utter
Its prayers, choking and stammering with ecstasy,
When all the hairs of my body will stand erect with joy!

Ah, how I long for the day
When an instant's separation from Thee, Oh Govinda,
Will be as a thousand years,
When my heart burns away with its desire
And the world, without Thee, is a heartless void.

Prostrate at Thy feet let me be, in unwavering devotion,
Neither imploring the embrace of Thine arms
Nor bewailing the withdrawal of Thy Presence
Though it tears my soul asunder.
Oh Thou, who stealest the hearts of Thy devotees,
Do with me what Thou wilt—
For Thou art my heart's Beloved, Thou and Thou alone.

By 1970, this prayer was recited every day after morning meditation in Southern California.¹⁴ When Swami Prabhavananda was present, he would lead the recitation sitting cross-legged facing the shrine; and even though it was an everyday occurrence, he recited the prayer with such natural sincerity, as though it was being re-experienced. When I first heard him, I thought it was his spontaneous heart-felt prayer.

Vedanta for the Western World

Vedanta for the Western World is a compilation of short essays edited by Christopher Isherwood, who said in his introduction, "...I am writing for Western, and I hope, intelligently skeptical readers."¹⁵ The first printing was in January 1946 with a second printing in February 1946. It features entries by a previously unpublished lecture by Swami Vivekananda as well as translations of teachings of disciples of Ramakrishna not previously available in English as well as

¹⁴ Swami Yogeshananda p 61 According to Swami Yogeshananda, around 1950, during his residency, Swami chanted in Sanskrit every morning at the close of meditation.

¹⁵ Christopher Isherwood (ed), *Vedanta for the Western World*, p 11

essays by then-contemporary swamis, For Western name recognition, there were contributions by Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, John van Druten, and Isherwood himself. But perhaps of most interest to Isherwood fans is his comprehensive introduction which covers an exposition of both Vedanta philosophy and the history of Ramakrishna and the Ramakrishna-Vedanta movement.

Ramakrishna and His Disciples

The next large project, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, was technically a solo project with a lot of C-suite external input from impetus to execution. Here is John Yale's firsthand account of the process:

Swami Prabhavananda had always hoped to inspire Chris to write the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami said that realizing this project was to be the culminating accomplishment of his life. There existed at that time in English only the official life, published in India,¹⁶ and the English translation of Romain Rolland's biography *Prophets of the New India*. Chris began at last around 1957 and finished the book in 1964. As usual he wrote neatly, systematically, turning out chapter after chapter, which he brought to the Green House living room on his weekly visits, to read to the devotees. He invited and accepted their criticisms graciously. The entire text was submitted chapter by chapter to the then General Secretary in India, Swami Madhavananda, who often made corrections of fact and even of language. The latter type of correction sometimes made Chris smart, but generally he accepted suggested changes humbly or occasionally worked out compromises.

The major source of facts concerning Ramakrishna is a huge Bengali book called "Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga" or *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*. Written by a direct disciple of Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda, who was himself a realized soul, the book is a storehouse of fascinating detail about a divine incarnation. [The English translation, *Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, by Swami Jagadananda, came out in 1952.] But, being a compilation of souvenirs and comments set down at different times, devoid of any all-over scheme, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*¹⁷ contains much overlapping and backtracking...Chris took the pains to make a précis of the whole book, so as to put the material in usable chronological order.

Regarding the biography of Sri Ramakrishna, Isherwood points out that many parts of that narrative would have been unacceptable in a work of fiction because they are difficult to understand and accept as true. They could only be written as a statement of fact. And actually, many of the reviews of the book were savage and illustrate what Chris wrote concerning the writer needing to rely on the experience of the reader to meet him partway.¹⁸

Isherwood describes a few behind-the-scenes incidents that happened along the way during the seven year writing process. In January of 1953, he was staying at the Trabuco Monastery to get away and write a novel, as he put it, to wage "a sheer frontal attack on a laziness block so

¹⁶ Yale probably refers to a 1928 biography by Swami Nikhilananda, with a foreword by Mahatma Gandhi.

¹⁷ [Swami Chetanananda](#) has since done another translation entitled [Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play](#).

¹⁸ Details of the reviews can be read in *My Guru and His Disciple*, pp. 287-288.

gross and solid that it seemed sentient and malevolent..." He was under great stress feeling that his future as a writer was at stake. He uncharacteristically launched a petitionary prayer at Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine, " 'If it's your will that I finish this thing, then help me.' ...My prayer could have been better phrased as follows: 'Don't let me feel guilty about trying to write this novel. Either convince me that I must drop it altogether, or else take away my writer's block, so I can finish my book quickly and get started on yours.'" ¹⁹ His prayer was answered. He was able to complete the book, which he describes as "my worst novel: *The World in the Evening*." However, the deal with Sri Ramakrishna was struck.

In 1957, Chris had a vivid dream of Swami Brahmananda in which Brahmananda blessed him. Swami interpreted this dream to mean that Chris was the right person to write Sri Ramakrishna's biography. Chris commented, "How like Swami that was! When he had set his heart on ²⁰something, it had to have the Lord's blessing."²¹

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

Chris was making no money at the time he wrote *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* but wouldn't accept any part of the advance.²²

A Guide to Western Literature

Swami Prabhavananda, like most well-educated monks, was well read in Shakespeare, whom he greatly admired and attempted to emulate; but he wanted a wider familiarity with Western literature so asked Chris to guide him. The first book Chris recommended was Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Prabhavananda was very impressed and used to quote the scene that dramatized the conversion of Father Zossima in his lectures. After *Brothers*, Prabhavananda requested more. Chris commented that, unfortunately, Swami had started at the top.

My Guru and His Disciple

Many of us find *My Guru and His Disciple* to be an important and inspiring solo contribution to Vedanta literature. In his introduction to *Vedanta for The Western World*, Isherwood defines Vedanta literature: "...the term 'Vedanta' covers not only the Vedas themselves but the whole body of literature which explains, elaborates and comments upon their teaching, right down to the present day." This book is better suited to discussion in the context of Chris' life when he wrote it, following decades of struggle to synthesize his literary persona to his Vedanta self, and his process for absorbing the death of Prabhavananda.

¹⁹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 207-208

²⁰ *Vedanta for the Western World*, p.1

²¹ *My Guru* 231

²² Yogeshananda, *Six Lighted Windows*, 106

Prabhavananda.

Swami Yogeshananda described Isherwood's literary contribution to Vedanta in its entirety as "stupendous."