

Paul Brunton: From Journalist to Gentle Sage

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

"I write for those who have felt the truth in intuitive flashes as well as for those who must be argued into it by intellectual reasonings."

—Paul Brunton, *Reflections on My Life and Writings*,
p. 125.



A BOW TO PAUL BRUNTON

I will always be grateful to Paul Brunton, for it was his first book that was also my first encounter with the spirituality of the East. I vividly remember how, at the age of fourteen, his *Search in Secret India* held me spellbound for weeks and months. I read it over and over again. The world it portrayed—of holy men and sages—seemed strangely familiar to me. His book laid the foundation for my subsequent lifelong professional and personal interest in India's spiritual traditions.

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Paul Brunton was born Raphael Hurst in London in 1898. There he pursued a career as a bookseller, then journalist, and later as a magazine editor—occupations that one would not normally associate with either wisdom or spiritual adventure. But Brunton was a rather unique individual who, like Alan Watts, Christopher Isherwood, and Gerald Heard, was destined to become a pioneer of the East-West dialogue. In his thirties, and despite his professional success, Brunton resigned his job and headed in an entirely different direction: Following his long-standing passionate interest in spiritual life, he traveled widely in the East, in search of answers to the kind of questions that our busy postindustrial civilization tends to ignore and suppress.

However, Brunton's spiritual quest had begun much earlier. At the age of sixteen he experienced a series of ecstatic states, as a direct result of having meditated regularly and intently for six months. Although the immediacy of these mystical experiences waned after several weeks, their afterglow lasted for three years, and they decisively shaped the remainder of Brunton's life. The contrast between these blissful mystical experiences and the drab materialism of his environment threw Brunton into a state of utter despair. He resolved to commit suicide, but being an eminently rational person, he picked a date a fortnight away, so that he could use that period of time to look up books on death in the local library. He chanced upon any number of spiritual books on the subject, which he devoured eagerly, and this led him to postpone his suicide— indefinitely.

He married relatively young, and in 1923 his only child, Kenneth Thurston Hurst, was born. Brunton did not feel prepared for fatherhood but was told by a spiritual elder that the relationship to the unborn child was karmic and necessary. As it turned out, they had a lifelong loving relationship, and Hurst produced an excellent biography of his father— *Paul Brunton: A Personal View* (published by Larson Publications). In this book, Hurst recollects many fascinating vignettes about his father. He mentions, for instance, that Brunton discovered early on that he had certain occult abilities and even revelled in their exercise. At one point, however, he received an inner warning that if he wanted to grow spiritually he would have to desist from exploiting these faculties. He heeded the warning and took to seriously cultivating the art of meditation.

Brunton's early spiritual efforts were aided by the British Buddhist monk Allan Bennett, also known as Bhikku Ananda Metteya, who was widely respected at the time and whom Brunton considered to be a bodhisattva. Another of Brunton's early guides was an American painter by the name of Thurston, in whom he saw an "advanced mystic." A third person who was similarly influential was an unidentified Indian gentleman to whom Brunton referred as "the Rajah." He predicted that Brunton would visit India one day, which came true in 1931.

In 1934, Brunton published his first book, *A Search in Secret India*, which was spectacularly successful. This was the first time he used his pen name, which came about partly by design and partly by accident. He had selected the name Brunton Paul for himself, but the typesetter accidentally changed it to Paul Brunton, and it stuck. His friends called him "PB." Over the years, Brunton's fledgling book, which records his early adventures in India, won him a quarter million readers. They were drawn from among the growing circle of Westerners who, in their disenchantment with the Christian establishment, were turning toward the Orient.

In particular, Brunton's book brought fame to one of the finest representatives of modern Hindu spirituality, Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), who must not be confused with Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement. The description of his encounter with Sri Ramana in South India is perhaps the most enthralling part of the book. Here is a sampling of Brunton's neatly journalistic treatment:

I fold a thin cotton blanket upon the floor and sit down, gazing expectantly at the silent figure in such a rigid attitude upon the couch . . . If he is aware of my presence, he betrays no hint, gives no sign. His body is supernaturally quiet, as steady as a statue.

Not once does he catch my gaze, for his eyes continue to look into remote space, and infinitely remote it seems.*1

At first, Brunton expects something to happen, and "the minutes creep by with unutterable slowness."*2 In the end, the sage's total quietness communicated itself to Brunton. Two hours later, he was still in a state of deep restfulness and meditation. Someone prodded Brunton, reminding him to ask his questions. Yet the peace that had overwhelmed him had also wiped out all his questions. At least they had vanished until his next meeting with Sri Ramana. Brunton had many animated conversations with the sage, in which he was always thrown back upon his own inner resource.

On Brunton's last day at the ashram, Ramana Maharshi again chose to be completely silent. He rested his peaceful gaze on the man from the West: It was a profound initiatory gaze. As Brunton described it:

His eyes shine with astonishing brilliance. Strange sensations begin to arise in me. Those lustrous orbs seem to be peering into the inmost recesses of my soul . . . I become aware that he is definitely linking my own mind with his, that he is provoking my heart into that state of starry calm which he seems perpetually to enjoy.*3

Time stood still. The hall emptied, as one disciple after another quietly left. Then only the sage and Brunton were left behind.

I am alone with the Maharishee! Never before has this happened. His eyes begin to change; they narrow down to pin-points. The effect is curiously like the "stopping-down" in the focus of a camera lens. There comes a tremendous increase in the intense gleam which shines between the lids, now almost closed. Suddenly, my body seems to disappear, and we are both out in space!*4

There was much that Brunton did not report in his books but which he later confided or hinted at to trusted friends. For instance, Brunton confided to one of his students that when he arrived at Ramana's hermitage all those years ago, the sage and he went for a long walk. Ramana told him that he, Brunton, had been graced with the highest state as a young man but lost it when the ego-personality reasserted itself. Now he had to work to recapture that condition he once enjoyed spontaneously. As Brunton later explained, in writing his early books he deliberately assumed a fictitious persona to make his works more accessible and readable. His own spiritual understanding, however, was much ahead of his early writings. When he arrived in India, he did not come empty-handed, nor was he in need of learning the spiritual ABCs.

We must remember here that Brunton was one of the first Europeans to abandon the inbred illusion of superiority and travel in the Orient as a pilgrim rather than as a tourist or conqueror. He confronted much narrow-minded prejudice, and this made some of his writing more polemical than we are accustomed to nowadays in such matters. Some of Brunton's disguised spiritual maturity is evident from his book *A Secret Search in Egypt*, which had a meteoric success when it was published in 1936. He met no sages in Egypt of the stature of Ramana Maharshi and the Shankaracarya of Kanchi, whom he revered. Yet, he did encounter the ancient esoteric tradition of that country. His spiritual adventure in the Cheops pyramid would not have been possible for an immature practitioner, who would have died from sheer fright.

Brunton was the only European ever given permission to spend an entire night alone in the Great Pyramid. Sitting in total darkness, hearing only his own breathing, Brunton entered a state of meditative inwardness. But the chamber would not yield its ancient secrets readily. He was assailed by monstrous appearances that filled him with fear and repulsion.

In a few minutes I lived through something which will leave a remembered record behind for all time. That incredible scene remains vividly photographed upon my memory. Never again would I repeat such an experiment. . . *5

Suddenly the onslaught stopped, and a new, benign presence made itself known. Brunton saw two tall figures in white robes approach. Then one of these awe-inspiring men, wearing the unmistakable regalia of a High Priest, spoke to him. This was followed by a striking out-of-the-body experience in which some of the hidden wisdom of the ancient Egyptians was revealed to Brunton. He was told that the mystery of the Great Pyramid is the mystery of his own self, that all the secret chambers and hidden records are to be found within himself.

Many readers questioned the veracity of Brunton's account of what happened in the darkness of the King's Chamber that night. However, certain aspects of the knowledge imparted to him by the adept Ra-Mak-Hotep were later confirmed. This includes the subsequent important discovery that the Sphinx is in fact a monument to the Sun-God Ra, as that spirit guide had mentioned. For Brunton, the principal objective of the book was to introduce his Western readers to the ancient but largely forgotten notion that the spiritual realm interpenetrates our physical plane, and that spirit beings are indeed as real as we are. That he chose a gripping narrative style to convey this message is only to his credit.

Brunton incessantly worked on his inner growth. He never stood still, and it was hard for many of his readers to keep up with his rapidly unfolding philosophical wisdom. In his recently published diary, we find the following entry: "The man who wrote that cycle of ten books is dead."*6 As Brunton continued his investigation of spiritual life, he began to see the limitations of traditional Hindu doctrines and approaches. He realized that conventional mysticism was not the final answer.

He expressed this new understanding in a book entitled *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, published in 1941. Those who had devoured *The Secret Path*, an inspired little volume, were dumbfounded. Suddenly they read that mysticism was not the answer, after all. They learned that the spiritual path was more arduous than that lyrical book had depicted. In *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, Brunton put forward a powerful critique of conventional mysticism, which seeks to abandon the world in favor of mere solitude and silence. He explained:

Meditation on oneself was a necessary and admirable pursuit, but it did not constitute the entire activity which life was constantly asking of man. It was good, but it proved to be not enough. For the efflux of time had shown me the limitations of mystics, and more time showed that those limitations were accountable by the one-sidedness of their outlook and the incompleteness of their experience.*7

His critique of ordinary Yoga and mystical trance perplexed many readers of his earlier works and outraged many Indians. They could not understand Brunton's quest for a more integral approach and culture. In particular Brunton had expressed some criticism about the teaching of Ramana Maharshi, which people promptly misunderstood to be a criticism of the sage himself. Brunton was greatly pained by this misunderstanding, which his own works had provoked.

His relationship to Sri Ramana was always one of purest admiration, gratitude, and spiritual affinity. In his second book, entitled *The Secret Path*, he had called Sri Ramana "the most understanding man I have ever known" who "possessed a deific personality which defies description."⁸ The book was inspired by a vision of Ramana Maharshi he had had in England. Today we would perhaps say that it was channeled wisdom.

Brunton always stood by this description of the sage he called his "Beloved Master" all his life. But once a public mood has been provoked—in this case primarily by uninformed book reviewers—it is hard to change it, however misguided it may be. I recall a conversation with an editor of Brunton's British publishers in London who expressed his consternation at Brunton's later philosophical works, adding with regret that he should have stuck to writing adventure stories. Of course, the editor had completely failed to understand Brunton's purpose, which was not so much to entertain but to educate and to reach people's hearts.

After the publication of *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, Brunton was no longer welcome at Ramana's hermitage, because of the machinations of certain disciples. During his later wanderings in India he would often travel within a few miles of the ashram but be unable to visit the master. "A lump would come into my throat and a choking sensation would seize me as I thought how close we were in spirit and yet so harshly separated by the ill-will of certain men and by the dark shadows of my own karma."⁹ He added: "That I was most unfairly treated by one ashram in particular and many Indians in general is a shameful fact, but nevertheless it was a fact which helped my own emancipation."¹⁰

Brunton's relationship with Ramana Maharshi survived all these external difficulties. In fact, he had numerous visions of the sage, the last occurring about fifteen months after Sri Ramana's physical death in 1950. In that vision the sage announced that they had to part. Brunton had no further visions of him, but from then on began to discover him more and more as pure spiritual essence. He conjectured that Sri Ramana would have been perfectly able to continue to manifest to him, as he continues to manifest to disciples to this day, but that he, Brunton, had to take the next step on the spiritual path.

That Brunton took more than the next step on the path is testified in part by the fact that toward the end of his life he was able to harmoniously diffuse the longstanding conflict with Ramana's ashram. In fact, he was invited to spend his final years at the ashram, which, however, was not possible for him for practical reasons.

With the tremendous success of his books, which have sold over two million copies in seventeen languages, Brunton found himself in the limelight of the Western spiritual arena. Since he was an intensely private person and had no desire to function as a guru to others, but preferred to point to the sages of the East and to stimulate philosophical inquiry rather than impose doctrines on others, he moved into seclusion in Switzerland.

His withdrawal from the public eye was so efficient that two major newspapers ran obituaries on him.

Brunton kept daily notebooks, in which he registered spiritual matters distilled from his own quest and relevant to other seekers. "I amused myself with scribbling mystical books to bore materialistic people, playing with queer thoughts which were thrown up into the air and caught on the tip of my pen," he wrote with tongue-in-cheek modesty in the opening essay to the volume containing his autobiographical recollections.

At the time of his death, on July 27, 1981, he had amassed some 17,000 pages of notes, all carefully organized into twenty-eight categories. The notebooks were intended for posthumous publication. This rich mine of Brunton's personal experience, wisdom, and thought has now been made available in a fine edition of sixteen volumes, published by Larson Publications, who are to be congratulated for executing this noble undertaking so expertly.

Brunton's philosophy, which he refused to label, is in consonance with the philosophia perennis. For him, philosophy was a matter not of ratiocination for its own sake but of wisdom, by which Truth can be approached directly. He understood philosophy as a practical orientation to life, the synthesis of religious veneration, mystical meditation, rational reflection, moral re-education, and altruistic service. The true philosopher is thus a spiritual practitioner of great maturity. As Brunton put it:

Only when the Overself has illumined every side of his personal being can he be said to have a complete illumination. Only then has he attained the sagehood of philosophy.*11

The Overself is Brunton's term for the innermost immortal essence of the human being, the point where we touch the Divine, or what he called "World-Mind." This "God-like" Consciousness, hidden in the heart of every being, is a universal Presence or Intensity. To realize the Overself as a constant background of daily existence is the task lying ahead of every person. First and foremost, Brunton was a sage, who used his writing skills to bring clarity and philosophical depth to his inner explorations, to work out what he called his own "intellectual salvation."

Secondarily, he was a writer who understood his vocation as a service to humanity. In his own words: "The best of being a writer is the opportunity given to show man his true worth, to lift up his own idea of himself, to persuade him that trivial aims are not enough."*12 The sixteen volumes of Brunton's notebooks give us a rare insight into an unusual man, who, without shedding his twentieth-century skin, fearlessly and with heartwarming self-honesty, explored the offerings of the East.

Though Brunton laid no claim to it, he was surely one of the finest mystical-and-philosophical flowers to grow on the wasteland of our secular civilization. What he has to say is important for us all. We need not keep a photograph of him on our desk, as did the rajahs of Mysore and Kasmanda, but we surely would do well to delve into his written legacy. After all, he asked to be "read rather than revered."

NOTES

1. B. Brunton, *A Search in Secret India* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1985), p. 140.
2. Ibid., p. 140.
3. Ibid., p. 162.
4. Ibid., p. 163.
5. P. Brunton, *A Secret Search in Egypt* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1984), pp. 69-70.
6. *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, vol. 8: *Reflections on My Life and Writings* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1987), p. 151.
7. P. Brunton, *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1984), p. 17.
8. P. Brunton, *The Secret Path* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1985), p. 12.
9. *The Notebooks*, vol. 8: *Reflections*, p. 233.
10. Ibid., p. 234.
11. *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, vol. 13: *Relativity, Philosophy, and Mind* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1988), Part 2, p. 253.
12. *The Notebooks*, vol. 8: *Reflections*, p. 32.

The Notebooks of Paul Brunton series, as well as other books mentioned in this article, can be ordered directly from [Larson Publications](http://www.larsonpublications.com), 4936 Route 414, Burdett, NY 14818.

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