

Discerning the Real through the Writings of Paul Brunton

Source: PAUL BRUNTON PHILOSOPHIC FOUNDATION

Link: <https://www.paulbrunton.org/discerningthereal.php>

Published on web-ur.com: 2023-10-01

Date of last update: 2023-10-01

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Unlike many of us who appreciate the teachings of Ramana Maharshi but were born too late to travel to see him, Paul Brunton ("PB") had the good fortune to meet the Maharshi in the 1930s. The reverence that PB felt for the Maharshi is evident in what he wrote after Maharshi left his body: *"One night in the spring of 1950, at the very moment that a flaring starry body flashed across the sky and hovered over the Hill of the Holy Beacon, there passed out of his aged body the spirit of the dying Maharshi. He was the one Indian mystic who inspired me most, the one Indian sage whom I revered most, and his power was such that both Governor-General and ragged coolie sat together at his feet with the feeling that they were in a divine presence. Certain factors combined to keep us apart during the last ten years of his life, but the inner telepathic contact and close spiritual affinity between us remained—and remains—vivid and unbroken. Last year he sent me this final message through a visiting friend: 'When heart speaks to heart, what is there to say?'"* (/notebooks/15/2#453)

During the years following his initial trip to India, PB first wrote *A Search in Secret India* and went on to create an impressive body of work on spiritual life. This *Mountain Path* issue offers a brief overview of some of the key ideas found in PB's numerous books. If you would like to learn more, recommended is PB's remarkable two volume work: *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* and *The Wisdom of the Overself*. The first volume is a masterful and reasoned presentation of the reality of Mind and the unreality of an external "material" universe—and describes the training needed for successful pursuit of philosophic yoga. Volume 2 is an in-depth presentation of the nature of the Self, God, and the Universe. PB conveys traditional wisdom in a form that speaks to the heart and mind of the contemporary aspirant. He also discusses practices for self-realization and philosophic insight, including the seven ultra-mystic exercises, and previews for practitioners something of the role of the sage in the world.

Mind

Mind, the Void, and Mind-in-Itself are ways that PB refers to reality. Words used for it (the Real, Absolute, Brahman, etc.) sound deceptively simple yet seem unattainable, perhaps because the Real is conceived as infinite and is beyond the reach of the usual ways of knowing. However, it is intimacy itself—what we are in the most fundamental sense of the term—and often termed the Self. Mind is concealed in our experience as the substance of all forms, or, using a movie analogy, it is like the screen, itself present but undetected so long as the superficial images mesmerize the unenlightened viewer. It is approached in mystical yoga by stripping away everything that is not purely it, and through this discrimination (sometimes referred to as *neti, neti*—not this, not this) the meditative process is brought to the threshold of Mind and rendered quiet and receptive. The unripe person often recoils in the face of its voidness; the ripe person surrenders and dissolves into it, never to be the same.

However, it would be incomplete to view the featureless Void in the negative sense only, for it is All. Everything that ever manifests is prefigured in its formless nature. Mind is the essence of the changing universe—all finite beings and things are its fleeting expressions. In Mind alone we find the unity which underlies and contains everything, because it is everything. Only in this way is non-duality truly non-dual.

Mind is pure awareness. Everyone experiences Mind at every moment in its limited forms as the states of consciousness: waking, dream, and deep sleep. These states are the activity of Mind, or in PB's language, "ideas or thoughts," which term includes sensations, feelings, concepts, emotions, intuitions, images, actions, and visions—anything and everything conceivable or perceivable can be understood as thinking or the functioning of Mind. In the example of dream, the dreamer's mind remains unmoved and undisturbed no matter what scenes it unfolds for the persons who appear within it

and who are captivated by the drama. Similarly, these ever-shifting movements of thought occupy the whole of a person's wakeful life—and the exclusive attention to the variety of these idea—images keeps one from becoming aware of their source, the Mind.

When we become more interested in the source of thought than in the thoughts themselves, we begin the journey home. The undifferentiated Mind, as it is “prior” to its activity that appears as the manifest universe, is accessed through both mystical trance and philosophic insight. If through trance, the ego and the world appearance will be temporarily annulled so long as the trance lasts. Once it is over, the mystic will be confronted once again with the ego/world dichotomy which, by comparison, will seem illusory to what was realized in the trance. But his or her life will remain challenging in many ways, for the advanced mystic is still not fully enlightened. It is not that the unchanging nature of Mind is the real and the world appearance is illusory. The illusion is not seeing that the world is Mind. The true philosopher (PB's term for a sage) knows directly that the so-called illusory world is the form taken by reality itself—it is the activity of Mind made manifest. This is the insight of the sage, and he or she permanently lives the realization that Mind alone is and all appearances are appearances of the real. As the Maharshi said when asked, *“It [the world] is unreal if viewed as apart from the Self and real if viewed as the Self.”* (Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, #516)

It follows that the sage has a compassionate and creative orientation to the world that is very different from the post-trance behavior of the mystic. For when we realize that the world is the incarnation of the Real, when we realize that the vast universe is a presentation by the Mind to the Mind, the tendency to leave the world leaves us. If a sage should choose to teach the illusory nature of the world rather than its reality, it is to help aspirants break their bondage to appearances, especially their identification with the body-thought as something externally and independently real or material. It is a method to encourage practitioners to shift their attention to the unseen reality.

PB begins his central teachings by demonstrating the reality of Mind. The aspirant then understands that if something is believed to be other than Mind, *this* is the mistake to be corrected through philosophic training. First one must comprehend that so-called “matter” (something external and other than mind) is thought and then *realize* THAT which thinks the world-ideas into appearance. Duality is the illusion that dissolves for the philosopher/sage. When we are able through this path to liberate all dualistic conceptions, however subtle, which put spirit in contrast to matter or to illusion, we transcend the greatest fallacy that has ever dominated humankind, and thereby attain permanent peace.

World-Mind

Nothing lacks value in the philosophic view of experience. At the very least, the people, places, and things we experience, being thoughts, point to the eternally present Mind which thinks them into existence, however fleeting they may be. And at the very most, our experiences each play their part in educating us during our multi-lifetime journey from darkness to light, from unconsciousness of our reality to full enlightenment as to our true nature. It is incorrect and irreverently dismissive to view the world which is the intelligent appearance of Mind as illusory and thus divest it of the remarkable value and education it provides the individuals evolving within its great school—a system that teaches wisdom, love and compassion, and skillful action.

Mind-in-Itself is incomprehensibly vast, anything and everything that manifests has its ultimate origin as Mind. In the ocean analogy, every wave, no matter how it is formed or how large and powerful or small and ripple-like, is after all, water. However, just as the kind of waves possible depend on many factors, such as the size and depth of the body of water, the force of the wind, etc., so too the kind of world-ideas that appear depends on many factors. Indeed, to move in thought directly from the Void-Mind to the keyboard under my fingers is too dramatic a step down from the all-powerful formless infinite. It is easy to see that in life there are many levels of intelligence and laws of manifestation operating, the higher more universal principles giving order to the lower more complex dependent arrangements. That activity or function of Mind-in-Itself that is the causal basis of all experiences, PB refers to as World-Mind. It is the ordering principle or God of this universe and its eternal vision of the World-Idea includes all pasts, presents, and futures for all beings in one inconceivable contemplation.

In the Bhagavad Gita, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna has so many doubts about himself and his duty as a warrior. After receiving some teachings, he begs Krishna to reveal His true cosmic form. Krishna complies and gives Arjuna the overwhelming spiritual vision which enables him to see Krishna in His fulness—as the magnificent and awe—inspiring universal manifestor, prefiguring in its great being everything that appears in the universe. Arjuna is overwhelmed as he sees that Krishna is the all-powerful determinant of all outcomes. Having thus granted Arjuna the grace of the cosmic vision, Krishna then urges Arjuna to accept his God-given destiny and do his duty and fight his foes—since “they are already put to death by my arrangement” (see Chapter 11 of the *Gita*, “The Universal Form,” verse 33).

In PB's language, the World-Mind knows all because it envisions all, and beneficently cares for the infinite multitude of beings according to its wisdom. It guides our development, wakes us to its Truth, opens our hearts fully that we lovingly surrender to its will, and teaches us to become clear expressions of its divinity. The World-Idea is what Arjuna was shown; it gave him the courage to do his duty as he could clearly see that his destiny and salvation were in Krishna's hands. *"The World-Idea contains the pattern, intention, direction, and purpose of the cosmos in a single unified thought of the World-Mind. Human understanding is too cramped and too finite to comprehend how this miraculous simultaneity is possible."* (/notebooks/26/1#87).

When we understand World-Mind to be the functioning of Mind, we also see that our manifest world is the self-externalization of the World-Mind's Ideas in the same way that our dream world is the externalization of our own mind's ideas. As PB writes: *"The infinite World-Mind sees the universe in itself and itself in the universe. It is not unaware of what is happening here below. Its consciousness is perfect, which means that it embraces all possible time-series. Every event is indeed present to it but not in the way in which it would be present to a finite mind. For World-Mind grasps its World-Idea in what to us is an all-timed fixity. The accomplished world, not less than its countless tiers of evolutionary change, suffering and joy, is simultaneously and infinitely present to this inconceivable consciousness. It is erroneous therefore to believe that what is now dead past to us is the same to the World-Mind. The latter views the universe not only in succession but also simultaneously. Such a state, such a higher dimension in which past, present, and future time are co-equal can of course no longer be called time in the human sense of the term."* (The Wisdom of the Overself, chap. "The World-Mind")

Mind is timeless, for it is beyond any reference to time at all. World-Mind is eternal in so far as its contemplation contains the universe of experiences for all creatures in an ever-present now. As we become more intuitively aware, the sense of the presence of a guiding perfection grows. The experiences of interconnection and synchronicity also give hints to the vast workings of World-Mind. There is an inconceivable intelligence, love, and power at the heart of each being that brings us the lessons we need to learn as we evolve.

The World-Mind's all-inclusive Idea of the universe may be perfect and all-accomplished from its standpoint, but for the individual centers of consciousness within that great Idea events must unfold sequentially in space-time according to the nature of each individual. The World-Mind's vision has to include the variety of space-time frameworks in order to manifest experiences for the beings within it. Thus we live a double life: there is the eternal being that we are in the World-Mind, and there is the evolving personality that is unfolding the World-Idea's vision for it. As finite beings, prior to awakening to our eternity, we feel the reality of these experiences like mesmerized subjects, or like characters in a dream. PB writes: *"Earth life is but a dream, lived out in a dream physical body amid dream environment. Dream experiences are only ideas; during sleep-dream man sees, hears, touches, tastes, and smells exactly as he does during waking-dream. Hence waking is but materialized ideas, but still ideas. God's cosmic dream: all universal activities are but different ideas of God, divine ideation made material and thrown upon the screen of human consciousness. The cosmic illusion is impinged upon man's sense and seen from within by Mind through consciousness, sensation, and bodily organ."* (/notebooks/21/3#23)

There are two forces in the World-Mind responsible for the unfoldment of the universe and of the lives within it: karma and grace. The karmic impressions of all things and beings in the universe are latent within the World-Mind until they are self-activated and externalized as the space-time world for individual creatures. It is karma that maintains the form, energy, habit of anything, and each has its own individual character as it arises, persists, and dissolves. Beginning with human stage, the laws of karma also determine the consequences of actions, whether they are moral or immoral. Additionally, there is the ever-present, ever-shining power of grace that inspires the karmic processes to change and evolve forms so as to better express the World-Mind's own perfection (though perfection in manifestation is not fully achievable). Grace may be thought of as active in a number of ways. One important way is as the intuitions that guide, evolve and transform karmic habit patterns into creative expressions and thereby promote our growth as human beings. It may seem like an endless, often painful process, but happy results-our spiritual awakening-are guaranteed by the World-Idea.

Overself

All beings are rooted in the World-Mind and each has its own unique evolutionary path to unfold, each has its own slice of the World-Idea pie, as it were. As beings within the World-Mind, we are divine children of the World-Mind and partake of the divine qualities and grandeur of the World-Mind but not its amplitude, scope, and power. Each individual is like a ray of the Sun, and serves to complete in form a part of the World-Idea. PB calls this ray the Overself. On the one hand, the Overself is unchanging and eternally part of the World-Mind and on the other, it presides over the reincarnational series

from unconscious creature to divinely inspired sage. The Overself of each person is distinct from that of another in the sense that each presides over a different series of reincarnations, presides over distinct destinies. It holds in latency the memory traces of the innumerable incarnations that in a sense distinguish one Overself from another. Each Overself reveals different divine possibilities and manifests a unique genius. Like a single ray, it shines on a particular person, and can be thought of as and experienced as presiding in the heart though it is also the consciousness that encompasses the entire panorama of each person's experience—whereas the World-Mind is like the Sun and shines on all equally.

When we consider self, we find it to be three-fold: the physical body; the personal consciousness which consists of feelings, thoughts, emotions, desires, images, impulses; and the impersonal observer which knows the first two categories as contents of consciousness. The body and personality are ephemeral, shifting phases of the self and by themselves give no sense of an unchanging identity. The persistent and permanent sense of “I” that accompanies us throughout our life is a testament to the presence of the impersonal observer. Its presence gives us the illusion that we will live forever, because, the Overself exists in eternity. While the series of reincarnations is a kind of immortality, it lacks the conscious unbroken continuity that comes with Overself realization—this is true deathlessness and is achieved by transcending the transient parts of self. The personal consciousness that has evolved after so many incarnations, with so much effort, is not swept away in realization. It becomes subordinate to the Overself and exists in its awareness. It is one's identity as the Overself that supplants the former mistaken ego identity. The Overself is the divine element in humans. It is our “place” in the Real, one in essence with World-Mind and Mind but distinguishable in function.

The answer to the inquiry “Who am I?” awakens us to our nature as pure awareness, Mind. This is the completion of the mystic quest. The answer to “What am I?” is the complementary realization that the ego/world are the temporal and spatial unfolding of the Overself's function as part of the World-Mind. Just as World-Mind is the eternal activity of Mind, so too is the person/world we experience the everlasting activity of the eternal Overself. We are, from this perspective, divine participants in a divine drama. With this realization, one moves beyond mysticism and becomes a philosopher/sage. Freed of egotism, the personality remains as a servant of the Overself. Instead of blocking the light that we are, the personality is now a vehicle of enlightened living.

The Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation was formed after the passing of PB to publish and preserve his writings. Although PB ceased his publishing efforts in the early fifties to lead a more retired life, he continued to write almost daily. There is a vast archive of unpublished material in addition to the sixteen posthumously published volumes of The Notebooks of Paul Brunton that were compiled and edited by the Foundation with the help of many volunteers. This work is a treasure house of teachings on almost every aspect of the path. Please see: The Notebooks of Paul Brunton to explore a digital version of these volumes or to acquire them through our publisher, Larson Publications.

Jeff Cox was formerly the president of Snow Lion Publications which specializes in books by the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. Since retiring, he now enjoys volunteering with the Foundation, and sharing more time with his wife and partner Christi.

This article was written for the Mountain Path, quarterly publication of Sri Ramanasramam, India.