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Rediscovering Paul Brunton

This spiritual seeker was a pioneer architect of the East-West bridge.

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It is 1985. Ten thousand miles across the globe, a visitor enters a modest courtyard that serves as a meeting place for one of India's most respected spiritual leaders, the Shankaracarya of Kanchipuram. Making his way past the entourage of attendants and followers, the visitor reverently greets the ninety-one-year-old yogi and silently hands him a photograph. The Shankara looks down at the faded picture, and a slow smile steals across his kindly face. The photograph is of Paul Brunton.

The West has gone East. Zen centers and vegetarian restaurants are everywhere; suburbanites are meditating; yoga, karma and guru are household words. Trace the origins of this eastward turning, however, and names like Watts and Suzuki come to mind—not Paul Brunton (1898-1981), the author, philosopher, and pioneer architect of the East-West bridge.

Since the early 1930s, Brunton's books on Eastern thought and Western culture have sold nearly two million copies. His first book, *A Search In Secret India*, is credited with introducing the philosophy of yoga to Westerners. The American Theosophist has hailed Brunton as "one of the West's most perceptive thinkers and deepest students of Ancient Wisdom." Yet he remains oddly unknown to an entire generation of Western spiritual seekers.

Or perhaps not so oddly. In 1959—with the publication of his final book and at the height of a career filled with offers to found ashrams and to establish journals—Brunton disappeared. Once a journalist bent on traveling to strange lands to report about Eastern spirituality, he chose to abandon his worldly role and to traverse instead those regions of the heart where all traditions become one.

What did he discover during this two-decade journey into his own being? No one can say for sure. We can only guess at the magnitude of the changes he underwent by the clues in the legacy he left behind: his notebooks—some 10,000 pages of what

Brunton described as a more “mature” version of his earlier work. Since 1984, Larson Publications has published a complete set, sixteen volumes of *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, including *Perspectives*; *The Quest*; *Practices for the Quest and Relax and Retreat*; *Meditation and The Body*; *Emotions and Ethics and The Intellect*; *The Ego and From Birth to Rebirth*; *Healing of the Self and The Negatives*; *Reflections on My Life and Writings*; *The Human Experience and the Arts in Culture*; *The Sensitives*; *The Orient*; *The Religious Urge and the Reverential Life*; *Relativity, Philosophy and Mind*; *Inspiration and the Overself*; *Advanced Contemplation and The Peace Within You*; and *Enlightened Mind, Divine Mind*.

To read the “new” Brunton is to rediscover an old friend. Wise and compassionate, he offers candid advice about the pitfalls and possibilities of spiritual practice. And just as the world changed enormously over the last twenty years of his life, so did Brunton evolve and adapt his approach to better meet the needs of today’s seekers. Although he was still looking to the Orient for inspiration and guidance, he did not believe that Westerners need shave their heads or sit cross-legged in a forest to attain spiritual fulfillment. Rather, he offered a simple, straightforward guide to how philosophical insights of East and West can help to create beauty, joy, and meaning in our lives—as we live them, not as they might have been lived had we been born at another time.

Soul Reporter

Brunton began his career quietly as a London journalist in the early decades of the last century. Although he was an inquisitive, talented reporter, his interest lay not in politics or current events but in the ancient riddles that have challenged philosophers through the ages: What is the meaning of the world and experience? What am I? What is the object of existence? Unlike many of his jazz-age contemporaries, Brunton recognized these questions as more than just abstractions to muse about over cognac and cigars. For him they were vital issues. From his youth they compelled his attention.

Other journalists of his time wrote about debates in Parliament or the successes and failures of British colonialism, then in its heyday. Brunton investigated the uncharted regions of the soul. To his task he brought a full range of journalistic skills, deliberately seeking out those individuals—philosophers, scientists, mystics—who might have the answers he wanted. It was not unusual to find him earnestly paging through a copy of Emerson or slipping softly into a meeting of the London Theosophical Society.

But Brunton’s quest was hardly a conceptual shopping spree. An inner force gripped him, irresistibly driving him to probe beneath life’s surface. With his characteristic thoroughness, he set about tracking down every lead available to him. He pondered all manner of recondite texts—on Platonism, Taoism, Vedanta—and investigated such then fashionable trends as parapsychology, occultism, and positive thought.

Many reference works that are easily available today were, of course, yet to be translated. People who have grown up during the last twenty years may have trouble realizing just how esoteric these studies once were. But Brunton’s research was exceptional; an acquaintance who knew him during his later years observed that Brunton’s address file contained the names of virtually every individual and organization even remotely connected with things spiritual.

Indeed, Brunton did meet many people—recognized authorities such as D. T. Suzuki, C. G. Jung, and Annie Besant—but he steadfastly refused to give exclusive allegiance to any of the paths he explored. He conducted his research with a mind as keenly analytical as it was openly receptive. If he was unwilling to relinquish his privacy and independence by joining groups or cults, he was yet prepared to acknowledge genuine spiritual impulse wherever he found it: in other individuals, in the beauty of nature, and in the hushed depths of his own meditations.



Searching In India

As he pursued his work during the late twenties and early thirties, a single image arose again and again in Brunton's mind. India, then considered by many to be a land of sleepy-eyed snake-charmers and yellow-robed wanderers, tugged at his thoughts. He had long revered India's rich philosophical heritage, and it was by the banks of the Ganges that he hoped to discover a living spiritual tradition.

To get to the Ganges, or to any other part of India for that matter, was no simple task in those days. One didn't just catch a flight out, booking a room in advance at the Calcutta Hilton. Traveling to India required a great deal of time and more money than a freelance journalist could easily scrape together. For many years Brunton's dream remained unrealized.

It was a chance conversation with an erudite Brahmin that convinced Brunton that, in spite of the obstacles, he could no longer resist the call of the East. Notebook in hand, he eagerly set sail to continue the search in his longed-for India.

What an odd sight he must have been, a smartly dressed Londoner squatting in the sand beside loin-clothed yogis, oblivious to the scorn of his fellow British. But it was Brunton's nature to penetrate appearances, not to uphold them. He persevered in his trek—often by donkey or oxcart—with his characteristic pioneer spirit.

And he was rewarded for his persistence. Traveling the back roads of the Indian subcontinent, he witnessed strange performances—yogis buried alive without apparent harm, magicians restoring life to dead animals, fakirs piercing their skin with skewers yet showing no signs of pain or blood. Brunton was impressed by these superhuman feats and by the extraordinary mental and physical discipline they suggested. Nevertheless, he knew there must be more, that beneath these circus-like antics there waited another India, more awkward looking and silent.

He sometimes felt he glimpsed this other India—in the devotion of even the most flamboyant practitioners, for example. Yet he was not satisfied. He had witnessed enough exotica to fill the pages of a sizable travelogue, but Brunton had begun to suspect that his trip had been in vain.

India, however, seems to have had its own plans for him. Just as he was preparing to go on with his journey, Brunton was encouraged to consult yet one more holy man. The advice came directly from the Shankaracarya of Kanchipuram, the spiritual leader of South India. The sage was Ramana Maharishi.

With the Sage of Arunachala

How rare it must be to meet a sage—someone of lofty attainment who can give a glimpse of enlightenment. Ramana Maharishi was such a person. In years to come, Brunton would meet other legitimate guides. Some would initiate him into the highest levels of philosophic mysticism. Yet it was Ramana who always held a special place in his heart. Brunton's book, *A Search in Secret India*, would soon bring the world's attention to this unprepossessing wise man. But when Brunton first journeyed up the mountain Arunachala to meet him, Ramana Maharishi was known only to a handful of his followers.

Upon arriving at the simple mountain ashram, Brunton found Ramana rapt in deep meditation. This in itself was not surprising—many adepts he had approached had appeared to be similarly absorbed. But as Brunton took his place in the long, quiet hall, he became aware of something unique: the Maharishi radiated a rare and palpable peace even as he sat transfixed.

As Brunton basked in that silence, he felt his distress, his unanswered questions, the strains of his search slipping away. At last he was certain of the higher possibilities open to humanity.

As Brunton was to write in later years, "The divine nature reveals itself anew in every human life. [People] make formal and pretentious enquiry into the mystery and meaning of life, when all the while each bird perched upon its green bough, each child holding its fond mother's hand, has solved the riddle and carries the answer in its face."

Brunton spent many hours with the Maharishi and gained great insight into the reality underlying each individual and all of nature. He affirmed that this reality can be directly experienced and that communion with it is every person's birthright.

Little is known about the remainder of Brunton's days with the Maharishi. Clearly, however, when the hour arrived for him to leave Ramana, when at last it was time to place his palms together in the customary gesture of parting, he did so with feelings of deep gratitude and heartfelt sadness. It was tempting to remain with the man who had, in Brunton's words, "returned him

to his soul.” In fact, he would visit Ramana again in later years. But, for now, Brunton could feel his search drawing him on. As his oxcart headed slowly down the mountain, though, he knew he would one day journey back to the Sage of Arunachala.



Home in London

With the memory of the Maharishi fresh in mind, Brunton returned to London in the late 1930s. Anyone who has ever emerged from a restful vacation into the harsh, frenzied commotion of a city can no doubt imagine how shocking it must have been to move from a secluded Asian ashram to the turbulent metropolitan center of the British empire. Brunton, however, held on to the peace he had found. He had perfected a method of inner quiet that enabled him to remain inwardly calm even as he moved about a city caught in the anxious preparations for a second world war. Yet his detachment did not eclipse his compassion. As he looked into the tension-filled faces of his fellow Londoners, he felt a deep urge to share his serenity.

Setting quickly to work, he wrote five books in three years—books he hoped would be a vehicle for others' enlightenment as well as a foundation for a new East-West understanding. Drawing on the discoveries of Sir James Jeans, Sir Arthur Eddington, and other eminent scientists of the time, he skilfully sought to bring the uncompromising mind of Western science into a new alignment with the tenets of mysticism and Eastern psychology. Through his writings, thousands of Western readers learned for the first time about meditation, karma, and the spiritual aspects of yoga.

But Brunton did more than simply translate foreign teachings into English. He labored to rescue them from the obscurity of time and cultural distance and make them meaningful—living a rationally understandable—to the modern West. Interest in his books spread quickly among scholars and non-scholars alike. Monk Gibbon recommended *The Quest of the Overself* as “by far the safest and most rational exposition of Eastern metaphysics and the practice of mental discipline that I have yet met.” The *London Times* commended Brunton for presenting his ideas with “the least possible ambiguity in untechnical language.” He rapidly gained a solid reputation as a knowledgeable and influential exponent of East-West thought.

Brunton, however, was searching for Truth, not fame. Even as his books were going in to print, he was once more pursuing his quest for living caretakers of the timeless wisdom—turning now to Egypt, to North and South America, and twice again to Asia. As he sat with adepts and teachers around the world, he deepened his vision of a synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophical thought. His life had now become a focused quest for the broadest possible understanding of human spiritual potential.

With each of his eleven books, Brunton incorporated the results of his investigations into an increasingly comprehensive philosophical system. Over time, the form of his writing changed noticeably. He had once recounted adventures—his night in the Great Pyramid, his hair-raising ride through Cairo traffic with a blindfolded sensitive behind the wheel. In later books—*The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* and *The Wisdom of the Overself*—he put forth a sophisticated discussion of the principles underlying individuals and the world. Yet consistent threads still ran through his work. Foremost among these were a sincere and an unflinching reverence for the sacred and an unshakable faith in its benevolence toward all beings.

“Individuals,” wrote Brunton, “can come to know a sacred presence both within and without. Each person carries a ray of his [or her] presence within the heart.” He called this ray the “Overself.” The closer one comes to his or her higher self, the more fully and directly it bestows its blessing and guidance. With this guidance, individuals can begin to see a divine wisdom unfolding in the universe and their own lives in a meaningful, orderly way. Brunton believed people are connected to all things through the law of karma, but his view of this law is not fatalistic. He saw all experience working to bring each person closer to self-awareness and a recognition of the individual’s true place in the cosmos. For Brunton, the cosmos was “superbly

intelligent beyond human invention, mysterious beyond human understanding, and...divinely holy." Each instant, every point of creation, from the stars above to each cell in the body, can be known as the unfoldment of a mind of infinite intelligence and eternal power. And as breathtaking as creation may be, it only hints at the greatness of that which lies beyond it. In Brunton's words: "There is but One God, One Life, One Infinite Power, one all-knowing Mind. Each [person] individualizes it but does not multiply it. He [or she] brings it to a point, the Overself, but does not alter its unity or change its character."

Skirting Public Attention

The world had endured the Depression and the second great war. Many disillusioned people found hope, solace, and meaning in Brunton's writings, and many sought his personal guidance. But just as he refused to have his name associated with any particular religion or movement, so Brunton rebuffed attempts to turn him into a philosophical guru. He spoke of himself as "a writer and researcher, with some experience in these matters, and that is all." Nonetheless, he was always willing, in his quiet way, to share his understanding with fellow seekers, to make their paths a little easier if he could. Those who met or corresponded with him over the years came to greatly love and admire the gentle, gracious man they knew simply as PB.

By mid-century, increasing numbers of individuals and societies had begun to take an interest in Brunton. Despite his expressed wishes, he continued to receive offers to become a public spiritual focus for others. He was repeatedly invited to establish ashrams, edit journals, and found schools based on his books. He never pursued any of these offers.

In 1959, a few years after the publication of *The Spiritual Crisis of Man*, his final book, and at the height of a spiralling career, Brunton disappeared from public view. So effective was his withdrawal that obituaries appeared in major newspapers. But Brunton was not dead. He had merely abandoned his worldly profession in favor of a quieter, more private kind of work.

This work—much of which he carried out within his own heart—made it necessary for him to retire into complete solitude.

The Later Writings

In the mid-1960s, Brunton surfaced in Switzerland, where he was to live for the rest of his life. The friends and students who visited him during this period were aware that he had undergone a profound change. Although they still saw before them the kindly British gentleman with the mischievous smile, they knew they also stood in the presence of something more rare.

And indeed, respected authorities such as T.M.P. Mahadevan (then head of Madras University) and the Shankaracarya of Kanchipuram began to refer to Brunton as a genuine holy man.

Brunton dismissed such references. He led a simple life, traveling here and there, granting private interviews, and writing—always writing. He wrote daily: insights, observations, and suggestions on matters concerning the spiritual path and self-realization. After Brunton died on July 27, 1981, his notebooks became available for publication, as he had designated this material to be selectively published after his death.

The culmination of his lifelong search for wisdom, Brunton's Notebooks are a final eloquent summing up of his experience. They are also an unparalleled resource for others who are seeking understanding. In page after page, volume after volume, he brings together age-old truths and contemporary commonsense, expounding an ethical, sane, and compelling approach to spiritual practice. His keynote is balance, and his uplifting message encompasses all phases of human experience.

Brunton's later notes take the form of brief, succinct passages—'seed thoughts', he called them. Wishing to bring profound ideas into sharp focus, he formulated passages that would draw his readers into a state of introspective thought and quiet contemplation. His topics range from metaphysical subtleties to practical instruction, yet they are, in fact, a harmonious whole. In sum, they affirm the divinity within each individual and show a way to self-realization.

Brunton's work is contemporary. He knew that the 1980s, certain to be a decade of increasing global complexity, would not be a time to withdraw from the world. He also knew that humanity could no longer afford to proceed, unchecked by deeper values, on its destructive course. Thus he stressed the need for individuals to work collectively to affirm the sanctity of human existence even as they search privately and in solitude for the source of their own selfhood. In this way, he believed this generation could lay a foundation of a much-needed new world civilization.

Brunton offers no short cuts to the goal, no instant realization. Neither does he offer occult powers or a miraculous end to the troubles of daily life. But he does offer understanding, hope, comfort, and an invitation to the greatest adventure of all: self-discovery.

“Learn to penetrate within yourself, your deeper, almost unknown self,” he says. “It will need patience to return day after day; not stopping until the truth is reached, the peace is felt, the blessing descends. It will need perseverance until the source of the strength is found. Thereafter it will take you over: this is grace. But remember: with each return from the day’s efforts you will be confronted by the world again, by its harsh reality yet glorious beauty, its stark conflicts yet benign interludes. So: know this world in which you have to live, its petty minds and noble souls. Learn from both. And when you have seen enough of the world’s surface, ask for its tremendous secret.” (Notebooks 2.3.164)

Selected Notes from the Early Works of Paul Brunton

“The first step is to discover that there is a Presence, a Power, a Life, a Mind, Being, unique, not made or begot, without shape, unseen and unheard, everywhere and always the same. The second step is to discover its relationship to the universe and to oneself.”

“I have gathered my materials from the west as well as the East, from modern science as well as ancient metaphysics, from Christian mysticism as well as Hindu occultism... My researches were made not only amongst modern books and ancient texts and living men. They were also made in the mysterious within-ness of my own consciousness.”

“Synthesis of Oriental and Occidental ideas, but also a new creative outlook that will transcend both. A world civilization will one day come into being through inward propulsion and outward compulsion.”

“I wish, therefore, to put before readers the fundamentals of this hidden philosophy in concise form and plain phrasing... put them in possession of the basic principles and provide them with an Ariadne’s thread to guide them through the maze of life and its problems of reflection and experience. Nay, even if I fail to do this but succeed in kindling within them something of the love of Truth, that passionate quest for the meaning of all of life, all experience and all this wonderful world, I shall have accomplished enough to justify our coming together in these pages.”