

[In Search of PAUL BRUNTON](#)

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Paul Brunton, thinking of a refreshing cup of tea, stepped through the doorway of his adobe hut out in the scrub brush near the sacred hill of Arunachalam, South India. As if in slow motion he watched his foot come down inches from the flushed hood of a cobra. Neither panicked. But they both froze, Brunton's brown eyes locked into the pure oyx eyes of the reptile. Brunton was a mystic adventurer/writer from Britain, whose masters included an American spiritualist, an Englishman Buddhist abbot, a Hindu aristocrat and now Ramana Maharshi, the stratospheric sage of Arunachalam. The cobra was a symbol of the mystic power of kundalini. However, that wasn't what Brunton was thinking about as he broke off the frightening communion with the cobra and backstepped awkwardly into the brush. An advanced disciple of Maharshi came along and actually petted the cobra, before it slithered off.

This scene is from Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*, the page-turning chronicle of Brunton's scouring of India for yogis with supernatural abilities or presences. *A Search* was first published in London in 1934, skyrocketed to popularity and has since sold 250,000 copies worldwide. Along with *Autobiography of a Yogi* and Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, it continues to be one of the most inviting, exciting gateways to the mystical Hindu environment. *A Search* was Brunton's first book, written after two years of ranging across India with a supply of pens, notepads, a typewriter, Kodak camera and a video camcorder-like mind when he was 32 year old. His search ended - personally and narratively - at the sun-and-advaita furnace of Ramana Maharshi's ashram.

A neurochemical of nomadic wandering filtered into his blood at this turn in his life. Even in *A Search*, Brunton describes his surreal encounter with an alabaster pale, reclusive Brahmin astrologer in Benares who fingers numerous crinkly charts and softly says, "The world will become your home. You shall travel far and wide, yet always you will carry a pen and do your writing work." Brunton wrote that at the time he couldn't measure such prophecies. But he did end up roaming the musical roads across Asia and the Middle East and writing thirteen books till 1952. These included *A Hermit in the Himalayas* and *The Secret Path*, which in 1990 was put in

audio cassette form by actor Christopher Reeves of Superman movie fame.

After 1952 he dropped out of published writing and recorded bursts of flash insight on napkins, envelopes, any odd scrap handy on his walks and later recrafted those into private journals. At a special horseshoe-shaped desk in his home in Switzerland he kept up streams of correspondence with inquirers and close students, for by the 60's he, the seeker, had become to many the sought-after master, though he heartily discouraged such a relationship. In a night vision in 1963 a supernova erupted in his psyche, what he knew as final enlightenment. It was intensely private and he only told his son and student, Kenneth Thurston Hurst, about it in 1979, two years before his death. Hurst recalls in his biographical book on his father (Paul Brunton, A Personal View), the 80-year-old's words: "My own final illumination happened in 1963. There was this bomblike explosion of consciousness, as if my head had split open. It happened during the night in a state between sleeping and waking, and led to deepening of the stillness: there was no need to meditate. The verse in the Bhagavad Gita which mentions that to the Knower the day is as night and the night is as day became literally true, and remains so. It came of itself and I realized the Divine had always been with me and in me."

In his winter years Brunton had aged into a philosopher's handsomeness, a kind of Celtic sage with currents of compassion in wide open eyes, a short white beard and fine onion-paper skin. He died on July 27, 1981 in Vivey, Switzerland - his son listened to a death rattle thrice, then a sigh of release.

Brunton wasn't born Paul Brunton. In a London suburb in 1898 he was born as Raphael Hurst. Trained in the metaphysical art of positive thinking and timing, he chose a new name for himself when he wrote A Search in Secret India. It was his first book, a time of new career navigation. His choice was Brunton Paul, a concoction he thought elegant. But his typesetter thought it was backwards and in a gesture of undisclosed helpfulness reversed it to Paul Brunton. Ten thousand copies rolled off the presses and Raphael Hurst chuckled at the karmic inversion - and happily accepted it. To his friends and students he became PB, a trimmed down appellation that reflected his trim mustache and innate modesty. To judge Brunton solely by his book A Secret would be misleading. In real life he was a far more spiritual man than Brunton the mystically curious journalist and occasionally annoyingly skeptic of A Search. True, he was both seeker and scientific literate. But his narration in A Search seems an exaggerated guise to create credibility in book of yogic transhuman testimony that also meets scientific prove-it, how-does-this-work scrutiny. He shrewdly noted the Hindu's tendency to accept

any claim as true. Years later Brunton humorously remarked that as his books ascended into higher strata of philosophy his audience shrank proportionately.

His mother and younger brother died when he was a little boy. By age sixteen Brunton had reached his full height - a short man, which he was slightly self-conscious of, but with a high forehead. He habitually noted mystically advanced people's precipitous forehead. And by age sixteen he was seriously meditating - indeed he was almost a doppelganger to the youthful Ramana Maharshi, 18 years his senior, who underwent a transformative samadhi at age 17. Brunton records in his private journal, "Before I reached the threshold of manhood and after six months of unwavering daily practice of meditation and eighteen months of burning aspiration for the Spiritual Self, I underwent a series of mystical ecstasies. During them I attained a kind of elementary consciousness of it...It was certainly the most blissful time I had ever had until then. I saw how transient and how shallow was earthly pleasure by comparison with the real happiness to be found in this deeper Self."

The ecstasies retreated after several weeks, but the afterglow left a refinement in his nerve system lasting for several years. By his own intentions he may not have lived into future years. He resolved in his teenage diary, "Commit suicide a fortnight hence." The sooty, caustic vibrations of London so bothered him he resolved that the only solution available to a young spiritual seeker was a swift exit from Earth. Apparently, moving to more congenial environs wasn't a realistic option.

In what would be a good Dickens plot, plans were set. And questions bubbled up. What would happen to him at death's door? Curiosity carried him to the British Museum Library where the reference librarian steered him to the shelves in spiritualism subjects. A stack of books on the astral worlds hefted in his hands, he went home and read. And read. More books checked out. Two weeks sped by and he noted the suicide better be postponed. With newfound knowledge of the realities of reincarnation and astral existence, the idea of suicide died.

Brunton formed a Bohemian parlor society of spiritual seekers, attended London Theosophical Society meetings and joined the Spiritualist Society of Great Britain. He found as a tributary of his meditations that occult powers were eddying into his consciousness. When Brunton learned that a well-known public speaker was practicing black magic, he attended the next lecture. When the address began,

Brunton psychically cut the light power. When the power was switched on again, he projected such a force it blew the light bulbs into shards. Fascinated, he plunged headlong into these waters, but an inner message flung him to shore: either continue the sidetrack of psychism or the central path of spiritual realization. He agonized, but chose the more important path to Self. The powers subsided, though he kept an intuitive sensitivity aglow.

His son Kenneth recounts how he brought his fianc[?] to meet his father for dinner in a restaurant to secure his blessings for marriage. Brunton sat in withdrawn, stony silence the whole time, leaving the son exasperated. Brunton later explained it was necessary to become absorbed in his Higher Self - requiring a meditative stillness - to feel out the prospects for the union. His feeling: not a good match. A while later the girl left Kenneth for another man.

Brunton's own marriage came with a flickering karma of divorce. Three years after his son was born, Brunton's wife came to him and said she had fallen in love with Leonard Gill, a fellow member of the Bohemian spiritualist circle. Without hesitation, and perhaps sensing some kind of providential release, he offered a divorce. He was amicable with his wife and Gill for life. Celibate bachelorhood suited him well from then on. And this, in large measure, contributed to his magnetism in later life.

Three times a day, as reliable as the old West's pony express teams, Brunton sat for meditation. And he was a strict vegetarian, for health, conscience and spiritual refinement reasons. His favorite dishes were rice-and-curries from India, which as *A Secret* tells in the opening chapter Brunton was introduced to by the mysterious "rajah" of London. Brunton eventually learned to cook curry like a Madras master.

Not surprisingly, Brunton's vocations orbited around publishing, either selling or writing. He sold books door-to-door, managed Foyles, then the largest bookstore in the world, and was half owner of a bookstore near the British Museum. It was at this bookstore that the turbaned and very urbane "rajah" - one of Brunton's three gurus - walked in and invited Brunton to a dinner that would change his life. Brunton never identifies the rajah by name even in his private journals. Years earlier a charismatic American painter named Thurston entered the bookshop and also suggested a dinner engagement. Thurston served as mystic mentor to Brunton for three years. Brunton wrote of him, "He was a phenomenally gifted clairvoyant and adept in the better sense who passed through the world quietly, unobserved

but unforgettable by those he helped." Thurston predicted Brunton would uncover and widely broadcast ancient mysteries. It is the rajah who casts the first spell of enchantment with India's yogis over Brunton. He even tells him he will definitely go one day. Brunton then and there is ready to book ship passage to Bombay. It is years though before he voyages to India and meets a stone-like yogi, the Shankaracharya, Ramana Maharshi, a swami who consumes poison and many others. Success, the magazine, got in the way.

(To be continued in the January 1992 edition).

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