

Paul Brunton

A Bridge Between India and the West

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

1. A Creative Independence
2. Issues in the Present Work

Part I: GENESIS OF A QUEST

Chapter 1: PRELUDE TO A QUEST

- 1.1 India and the West
- 1.2 Early Years
- 1.3 Theosophy
- 1.4 The New Science
- 1.5 Independent Spiritual Seekers
 - 1.5.1 Adventurers of the Spirit
 - 1.5.2 Sir Francis Younghusband
 - 1.5.3 Guénon, Krishnamurti, and Brunton

Chapter 2: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

- 2.1 The Three Journeys
- 2.2 Brief Encounters
 - 2.2.1 Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram
 - 2.2.2 Sahabji Maharaj
 - 2.2.3 Krishna Menon (Atmananda)
- 2.3 Major Encounters: Ramana Maharshi

Chapter 3: IN MYSORE

- 3.1 The Maharaja: A Philosopher King
- 3.2 Subrahmanya Iyer: A Neo-Vedantin
 - 3.2.1 Renewing Hindu Tradition
 - 3.2.2 Neo-Hindu Inclusivism
 - 3.2.3 Reinterpreting Shankara
 - 3.2.4 Remarks
- 3.3 The Master and the Maharaja
- 3.4 Indian Master and British Disciple

Part II: THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

Introduction

Chapter 4: INQUIRING INTO THE WORLD

4.1 Critiquing Materialism

4.1.1 A study of Perception

Sensation to Perception

Three Kinds of Optical Illusions

4.1.2 Structuring Cognition: Space, Time, and Causality

Space and Time

Causality

Two Remarks

4.1.3 Modern Science and the Concept of Matter

4.1.4 Mentalism and Idealism

Berkeley's Immaterialism

Prakasananda's *drsti-srsti-vada*

4.2 Mentalism and Cosmogony

4.2.1 Causality of Ideas: the Notion of World-Mind

Karma

Evolution

4.2.2 Cosmogogenesis: the Notion of World-Idea

Cosmogogenesis

The World-Idea

4.2.3 Individual Mind and Cosmic Mind

Mind and Brain

"Double Creation" of the World

4.3 Mentalism and Non-Duality: the Notion of Mind

4.3.1 A Key to Non-Dualism

A Non-Dualist Formula

The Status of Manifestation

Inclusive and Exclusive Views of Reality;

vivartavada and *ajativada*

4.3.2 A Threefold, Non-Dualist Conception of the Real

A Diagram

4.3.3 Symbolism of Numbers

4.3.4 Conclusion: Mentalism and Advaita

Chapter 5: INQUIRING INTO THE SELF: THE CONCEPT OF THE OVERSELF

5.1 The Illusory Nature of the Ego

5.1.1 Discriminating Subject and Object: *drg-drsya viveka*

5.1.2 Analyzing the Three States of Consciousness: *avasthatraya*

5.2 The Concept of the Overself

5.2.1 Its Evolution in Brunton's Thought

5.2.2 A Metaphysical Principle of Consciousness

5.2.3 The Overself as an Intemediary

5.2.4 The Overself and the Individual Karmic Series

5.2.5 The Overself as Our Higher Individuality

5.2.6 A Dual and Paradoxical Concept

5.2.7 The Overself and Vedantic Notions

5.2.8 The Overself and Non-Dualism: two Interpretations

A Metaphysical Hypothesis

A Hypothesis of Psychological Realism

5.2.9 A Soteriological Aid for Westerners

5.2.10 The Overself and Other Traditions

5.2.11 Symbols for the Overself

Divine Atom in the Heart

Inner Divinity

Metaphors of Divine Emanation

Chapter 6: THE PHILOSOPHIC LIFE

6.1 An Ethical Critique of Materialism

6.1.1 Brunton's Evolution

6.1.2 Critiquing Materialistic Values

6.1.3 The War: a "Materialist Cancer"

6.2 The Philosophic Life

6.2.1 The Philosophic Discipline

6.2.2 Long and Short Paths

6.2.3 The Notion of Grace

6.2.4 Progressing on the Path

6.2.5 Stages and Aspects

6.3 The Ideal of the Sage

6.3.1 The Faculty of Insight

6.3.2 Realization

6.3.3 Ethics and Metaphysics of Compassion

6.3.4 Character of the Sage

6.3.5 Synthesis and Balance: the Idea of Intermediary

APPENDIX: Mutual Impressions: Brunton, India, and the West

1. Brunton and India
 - India's View of Brunton
 - Brunton's View of India
2. Brunton and the West
 - The West's View of Brunton
 - Brunton's View of the "Hinduized" West

CONCLUSION

1. His Work: Renewal and Synthesis
 - A Reformulation of Advaita Vedanta
 - A Contemporary Synthesis
2. The Man: Bridging East and West
 - Seeker, Messenger, Awakener, and Guide
 - A Pioneer

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* * *

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It is with great satisfaction and relief that we are at long last able to bring to conclusion this translation which is now to be made available on the internet.

The original thesis, the work of seven long years, has so far been the only academic work on Paul Brunton. In it, I have attempted to honor his pioneering contribution to

the emerging culture of East and West, while placing him against the backdrop of spiritual currents of his time, tracing his life through his Indian years, and examining the influence of traditional and Neo-Vedanta on his ideas. The picture of Paul Brunton and his work which emerges in this scholarly study cannot hope to do justice to the man or his vision of the philosophic life, which have been a source of inspiration for so many. Nevertheless, I hope that my work will be of some use to those interested in having a context for his writings.

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INTRODUCTION

There is probably no more appropriate way to enter into the spirit of a seeker than to retrace the path leading to the source of his ideas and to recount the subjective facts that led to his discoveries.

– Aniela Jaffé¹

What I have tried to do here is to “retrace the path leading to the source” of Paul Brunton’s ideas and to “recount the subjective facts that led to his discoveries,” through a two-fold perspective where a survey of his life reveals how his ideas developed. I will examine the influence of India, of both its living masters and its traditional doctrines, particularly Advaita Vedanta, on the British writer Paul Brunton (1898-1981), author of eleven volumes published during his lifetime and sixteen volumes of *Notebooks* posthumously published.

My research led me successively to:

– Switzerland, where the author died in 1981. My inquiries led me to the municipal offices of Vevey, Montreux, and Lugano, as well as to Zurich where I met several individuals who knew Brunton well and who gave me both biographical and personal information.

– South India, where Brunton spent many years and studied with several teachers. I met with the daughter of one of them (the late Subrahmanya Iyer) and obtained copies of original correspondence from Brunton to Iyer dating from 1938-1940.

– The United States, where I did research in the archives of Wisdom’s Goldenrod Center for Philosophic Study in Valois, N.Y., founded by friends and students of Paul Brunton. There I had access to Brunton’s personal library, including the voluminous notes he took during his ten-year sojourn in India. These unedited notes constitute my main and most valuable source of information for the present work.

Paul Brunton was a mystic² and a philosopher,³ as well as an esotericist. One or another of these aspects of his being came to prominence at various times during his life, which might thus be divided into four periods:

1. Adolescence and early twenties, when the mystical and esoteric aspects were most

¹ Aniela Jaffé, Introduction to C.G. Jung, *Ma vie* (tr. of his *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken* [English tr.: *Memories, dreams and reflections*]), Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1973. Curiously, the paragraph containing this quote is missing from the English translation.

² Or better, a contemplative, if the word mystic implies union with a personal God.

³ In the larger sense of visionary thinker.

visible (involvement with the Theosophical Society, etc.).

2. Early adulthood, where the mystic or contemplative found expression in his early works, *The Secret Path*, *The Inner Reality*, and *The Quest of the Overself* (a period marked by the influence of Ramana Maharshi).
3. Mature years, from age forty, during which (under the influence of pandit Subrahmanya Iyer, personal teacher of the Maharaja of Mysore) the mystic and esotericist aspects receded, and the philosopher emerged in his two major works, *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* and *The Wisdom of the Overself*.
4. Last years (the period of the *Notebooks*), where he was fully a philosopher, one whose outlook embraced mystical contemplation, while traces of the esotericist remained in the background.

In this work, I am mainly concerned with Brunton the philosopher, and to a lesser degree with Brunton the contemplative.

1. A Creative Independence

Paul Brunton's most characteristic trait was probably his individualistic temperament, an essential aspect of which was his strong need for independence. One notes his aristocratic need for privacy, his love of solitude, and his distance from the conventional herd (those unready to think for themselves). Like Emerson (a favorite author), he extolled "self-reliance."

He was thus a fiercely independent thinker, standing apart from all established schools and movements. His membership in the Theosophical Society constituted only a brief, youthful interlude in a life which otherwise remained on the margin of all organizations, even esoteric ones. Brunton justified his dislike of organizations in several ways: history shows that groups sooner or later degenerate into cliques, which in the end defend their own interests and survival above all. Moreover, the existence of rival groups perpetuates antagonisms, prejudices and hatred, all contrary to the ideals proclaimed by each. Freedom from ideological ties encourages impartiality and authenticity in the search for Truth. One who is brave enough to follow his quest alone, outside the protective fold of religious or spiritual circles, is free to go his own way, unconstrained by dogma. Brunton admits that while groups can help beginners, at a certain point they may hinder inner progress; thus an advanced mystic may feel no need to be part of a community. That was the case for Brunton himself, who was sensitive to the fact that "the Wind bloweth where it will." His definition of a sage could be applied to himself:

He is a prophet without a church, a teacher without a school, a reformer without an

institution.⁴

This firm stand against organized groups does not merely reflect the author's individualism. It expresses as well his deep conviction that the Quest is an individual affair. He was fond of Emerson's remark, "Souls are not saved in bundles," and maintained that only *alone* can we find Truth, in the depths of our own innermost being, alone with the Alone:

What chance has the individual spiritual educator to continue his work when public and government alike accept the false suggestion that only through large organized groups and recognized traditional institutions can people be correctly led? The end of such a trend can only be as it has been in the past—monopoly, dictatorial religion, centralized tyrannical power, heresy-hunting persecution, and the death of individualism, which means the death of truth. Jesus, Buddha, Spinoza were all individualists.⁵

Thus Brunton not only doubted the efficacy of organizations in the realm of the spiritual, but he as well found them to be potentially dangerous.

From this affirmation of independence two observations follow:

– The teachings Brunton proposes under the general term 'philosophy' find no exact correspondence in any one school of thought, whether orthodox (i.e. Advaita) or esoteric (i.e. Theosophy). Thus one can clearly state that despite his many allusions to Brahmanical or Hindu thought (i.e. his use of the terms *yoga*, *karma*, *non-duality*, and more rarely *Brahman*, *atman*, or *samadhi*), Brunton does not invoke exclusively the authority of Advaita Vedanta. It is nevertheless my intention in this study to examine the influence of Advaita on Brunton's thought.

– Brunton wrote for a public without affiliation: for individuals dissatisfied with the prevailing materialism who found no place in orthodox institutions.

2. Issues in the Present Work

If this higher philosophy is to become more acceptable among the Western races, it will have to be formulated by members of those races themselves and presented in a modern, suitable form. It will be necessary to find inspired Western sources to whom we may turn for its interpretation and Truth instead of trying to depend on contemporary India.⁶

⁴ *Notebooks*, XVI, 1, 4, 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, XVI, 1, 4, 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*, X, 1, 127.

My purpose in this work is to determine whether and in what way Paul Brunton's works are a modern reformulation of Advaita Vedanta. We will identify in his writings ideas of Vedantic origin, touching briefly on elements drawn from other traditions or currents of thought. We will then examine how he adapted these ideas for Western readers, through his use of modern, non-Sanskrit terminology. It is here that the most intricate questions arise, notably relating to two crucial points of Brunton's teachings:

First, regarding his doctrine of mentalism: was it already stated in the classic Advaita texts, notably in Shankara; did it only appear in a later Vedantic school; or is it rather a wholly modern interpretation of the doctrine of *Maya*, unknown to classic and medieval Vedanta, and specific to a Westernized Neo-Vedanta?

Second, concerning his concept of the Overself: did he take it from the Vedantic *Atman*; is it the *Atman* in Western disguise; or is it a new concept? And how does he maintain the idea of a "higher individuality" which the concept of an Overself implies, while affirming at the same time a doctrine of non-duality?

We will pose another, more general question: is it possible to acculturate Vedanta to the West (in the sense that one says one acculturates Christianity in Africa and Asia)? And if so, what would be the conditions necessary for this to happen? This is an underlying issue in the present work, and will be addressed in its Conclusion. In this regard, one should keep in mind the following: giving Vedantic teachings to Westerners was not the way of Hindu tradition, which limited access to Vedic and Vedantic knowledge according to strict criteria of race, gender, and caste. Teachings were traditionally transmitted orally from master to disciple, and not through printed works. Thus the fact that Paul Brunton, a *mleccha*,⁷ was accepted as a student by Hindu masters and encouraged to spread their philosophy in the West, already indicates that this was an instance of Neo-Vedanta, the reformulation of Vedantic tradition by progressive Hindus following their encounter with European culture and values.

This work is in two parts: Part I, "Genesis of a Quest," evokes the writer's early years against the backdrop of early twentieth-century currents of thought. Brunton's sojourns in India will then be surveyed in some detail.

Part II, "The Quest for Truth," examines Brunton's thought from the perspective of the history of ideas, as part of the spiritual and intellectual exchange between India and the West. In this regard we will look at Advaita's influence on his doctrine of mentalism (Chapter 4) and on his concept of the Overself (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 will examine Brunton's views on ethics and spiritual practice. Finally, in the Appendix, we will examine how Brunton viewed India and its influence on the West, as well as how he himself was received by India and the West. In the process, we will attempt to sort out the ways in which Paul Brunton, India, and the West influenced one another.

⁷ Sanskrit for foreigner or barbarian, generally with a pejorative connotation.

PART I: GENESIS OF A QUEST

CHAPTER 1: PRELUDE TO A QUEST

In this chapter we will attempt to outline how the Westernization or modernization of Vedanta was achieved, in part by the Hindus themselves following the long period of reciprocal influences between India and the West. We will then review Paul Brunton's early life, prior to his Indian experience, and look at the ways he was influenced by Theosophy and the New Science. Finally, we will attempt to place him among spiritual seekers of his time who attempted to bridge East and West.

1.1 India and the West

One could not begin to sum up here the long history of reciprocal influences which resulted from India's encounter with the West.⁸ Western Orientalists, notably the pioneers of modern British Indology, Sir William Jones (1746-1794), Sir Charles Wilkins (1750-1836), and Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), had studied Indian thought and culture with enthusiasm, paving the way for later spiritual explorers whose lives, thought, and work would be directly influenced by all that their erudite predecessors had patiently brought to light. While scholars set out to discover the soul of India, merchants, engineers, administrators, and Christian missionaries attempted to imprint Western traits upon this soul. India, for its part, accepted railroads, tribunals, and British schools, while preferring to keep its soul Hindu, allowing Christianity only a marginal success. Christian influence was felt more importantly in the reinterpretation of Hindu tradition brought about by the Neo-Hindu movement, which we will discuss briefly here.⁹

The principal creators of the movement came from Bengal. Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), founder of the reformed Hindu sect Brahmo Samaj, was the "father" of the cultural and ideological rapprochement between India and the English:

He was the first Indian who realized the great good which the country would reap from its connection with Britain and from the leaven of Christianity. But he realized to the full that no real blessing could come to India by the mere adoption of Western things unchanged. India, he said, would inevitably remain Indian. No gift from the outside could be of any real value except in so far as it was naturalized.¹⁰

⁸ C.f. W. Halbfass' excellent study, *India and Europe*, N.Y., 1988.

⁹ Here we will simply mention a number of well-known historical landmarks indispensable to understanding Neo-Hinduism. In Chapter 3 we will present a more detailed study of its ideas as presented to Brunton by Subrahmanya Iyer.

¹⁰ Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movement in India*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 30.

This remarkable man seemed to have pioneered the acculturation of Christianity in India, as well as pioneering Neo-Hinduism—Hinduism re-conceived, re-evaluated and reformed in light of the impact of the West. What is said about him in the above quote could apply as well, *mutatis mutandis*, to Paul Brunton. Brunton believed that the West would remain itself, and that neither Vedanta nor other Asian doctrines would be presentable to a wider world without being reformulated.

Thanks to one of Ram Mohan Roy's successors, the Bengali Brahmin Keshab Chandra Sen (entered Brahma-Samaj in 1857; d. 1902), three new elements were introduced to Hinduism, directly or indirectly due to the presence of Christian churches in India: a missionary spirit, a spirit of social and humanitarian service, and a religious universalism.

This last came not from Christian missionaries (who were at that time quite far from it) but from the influence of another Bengali Brahmin, Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Having practiced Hindu, Christian, and Moslem *sadhanas*, Ramakrishna found at the end of his quest that they led to the same divine revelation under different names. Sen borrowed this idea from Ramakrishna, whom he had met in Calcutta in 1875: all the great religions are true, because all lead to the same Truth. Keshab embodied this idea in the Church of the New Dispensation, which he founded in 1881 with the aim of replacing the Brahma-Samaj. In fact, his new faith was a sort of syncretism, adopting as its emblem “an extraordinary symbol made up of the Hindu trident, the Christian cross and the Crescent of Islam.”¹¹

But another Indian institution was destined to exemplify these three features of Neo-Hinduism throughout the world, an organization which would itself become the symbol and spearhead of the movement: the Ramakrishna Mission, personified in its celebrated founder, Swami Vivekananda. Henceforth the new Hinduism would loudly proclaim its proselytism (through Vivekananda's voyages to the West, the founding of ashrams in many countries, translations of Hindu scriptures etc.), its philanthropic activities (schools, dispensaries, charitable institutions), and its universalism, later adopted by the Neo-Vedantins (of whom Radhakrishnan is the most representative and best known): there is only one Reality to be known, the same for all seekers, but the ways to it are many. Advaita Vedanta, the Royal Path, in its vision of a non-dual Absolute, includes and transcends all other doctrines with their more specific and subordinate points of view.

1.2 Early Years

Paul Brunton, whose real name was Raphael Hurst, was born in London on

¹¹ Ibid., p. 56.

November 27, 1898, the son of Jewish parents who had emigrated to England from Eastern Europe. We know almost nothing of his childhood, except that his mother died of tuberculosis when he was thirteen, and that his father subsequently remarried.

Perhaps the early passing of his mother contributed to the already sensitive child's inclination towards the supernatural and spiritual. This much is certain: in the months following her death, he became more and more introverted, and at age sixteen he was having his first spiritual experiences:

“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. If anyone could imagine a consciousness which does not objectify anything but remains in its own native purity, a happiness beyond which it is impossible to go, and a self which is unvaryingly one and the same, he would have the correct idea of the Overself....”

The glamour and freshness of [Brunton's] mystical ecstasies subsided within three or four weeks and vanished. But the awareness kindled by them remained for three years.¹²

These experiences further increased his sensitivity. The adolescent felt a widening chasm between himself and his prosaic surroundings, and he decided to end his life. Still, his curiosity about death itself and what lay on the other side led him to search for all sorts of doctrines at the British Museum Library. Thus his projected suicide, first indefinitely postponed, was finally cancelled.

It was likely soon after that Raphael Hurst decided to join the Theosophical Society. We have a picture of these youthful years in a novel by Michael Juste, one of Brunton's co-disciples at the Society.¹³ Young Raphael appears in this book in the character of David, a pale and slender youth, a dreamer “inclined towards mysticism.” It was a bohemian period of his life, and London was the place to be:

One thing that amazed me was the number of small societies teaching occultism and mysticism, most of them being offshoots of Theosophy. Modern Rosicrucianism, Buddhism and Gnosticism, Christian mysticism and Indian Yoga, all found plenty of exponents.¹⁴

The young Hurst and his companions led a life of poverty; they were carefree and impractical idealists. At one point Raphael and Michael launched themselves into a brief bookstore career. Unfortunately, their shop was in a neighborhood that few visited, and the business failed within a few months. During this period, the future Paul Brunton

¹² From *Paul Brunton: a Personal View*, by Kenneth Thurston Hurst, Burdett, N.Y., 1989, pp. 42-43.

¹³ Michael Juste, *The White Brother: an Occult Autobiography*, London, 1927.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

developed his innate gift of occult powers:

I developed in little time powers of mediumship, in particular clairvoyance and clairaudience, and thus obtained the best kind of proof in the existence of a psychic world, in other words by personal experience, without having recourse to professional mediums. After I had completely established the truth of the afterlife for myself, I turned toward the study of Theosophy and I belonged to the Theosophical Society. I am aware of what I learned there in the course of this second phase; but at the end of two years I left the Society. I felt that the adepts who had presided over its foundation were now retired, abandoning the society to its own devices. But it was Theosophy which gave me my first introduction to Oriental thought....¹⁵

After his break with the Theosophical Society, young Hurst frequented other groups and esoteric circles,¹⁶ belonging for a short time to the Spiritualist Society of Great Britain. During this time, alongside the unsuccessful bookstore venture, he became a free-lance journalist, writing under different pseudonyms, notably for the *Occult Review*. His first publication, at age twenty one, seems to have been a poem, “Along the Mystic Road,” which appeared in November 1919 under the name Raphael Meriden.

In November 1921 he published an article under his real name, “The Occult Value of the Scientific Attitude,” followed in May 1922 by “The Two Faces of Man,” where he examined various types of mysticism and occultism. These articles reveal much about Brunton himself. On the one hand, he considered himself both an esotericist drawn to mysteries and occult sciences, and a spiritual aspirant seeking mystical union with the divine. In addition, the scientific method with its precision appealed to him, and we see him already attempting to reconcile science and spirituality.

Further articles appeared in the same journal. “Beyond the Cup of Youth,” published in March 1928 under the name Raphael Delmonte, is a flowery and allegorical text in which the author seems to bid fond farewell to a youth spent in mystical reveries (he was then thirty years old). “With a Southern Indian Tantrist,” in the July 1932 issue under the name Brunton Paul, relates an incident from his first tour of India. “Crowley’s Magick,” appearing in November of that year, this time under the definitive pen-name Paul Brunton, is a review of Aleister Crowley’s book, *Magick in Theory and Practice*.¹⁷ Brunton here mocks the author for his vanity and love of provocation, and he wonders if

¹⁵ Excerpt from an article in *The London Forum*, ca. 1930.

¹⁶ “England, contrary to popular opinion, has given much to the esoteric: initiates do not take refuge only in Scotland, and London does not shelter only empiricists.... Astrology was English in the nineteenth century with Alan Leo; magic was English in the twentieth century with Aleister Crowley.” – Pierre Riffard, *L’Esoterisme*, Laffont, 1990, p. 883.

¹⁷ “This man is probably the greatest and most disturbing, perhaps the only magician of the twentieth century in the Western world” – K. Seligmann, in Riffard, op. cit., p. 883.

Crowley, figurehead of the new English magic, should be considered a true magician, a fool, or a charlatan of genius.

Brunton understood the allure of the occult, and he overcame its temptations through great personal effort. A frequenter of Theosophic and spiritualist circles, he had cultivated and trained his psychic powers. Then he heard an inner warning:

He had to choose between the sensational and the true albeit less spectacular avenue of solid spiritual practice. If he chose to continue developing his occult powers he could perhaps become a renowned psychic, but it would be with the understanding that this path was not the true spiritual path. Thus he had to choose. He knew his decision would be a weighty one. And he agonized over it. The temptation to continue his occult practices was strong, but he knew he had to leave the occult and devote himself to the true spiritual path. He told me that once he had made this decision his occult powers left him and he was no longer able to indulge in them.¹⁸

In his posthumous *Notebooks* are numerous unequivocal condemnations of occultism as being incompatible with the true spiritual path:

What did Jesus mean when he rebuked those who sought to enter the kingdom of Heaven like thieves breaking in over a wall? He meant that they were trying to enter without giving up the ego, without denuding their consciousness of its rule. Who are these robbers? They are the seekers of occult power.¹⁹

The young Brunton was influenced by two strong personalities who were also his first spiritual teachers. The first of these, Allan Bennett, was a British chemist who became a Buddhist monk in Burma under the name Ananda Metteya, returning to England on the eve of the First World War (he died in 1923). In a 1934 article in *The London Forum*, Brunton wrote of him:

I was fortunate enough to become a close friend of the Bhikku Ananda Metteya, who was undoubtedly the first great authority on Buddhism to step out of the cloistered retreat of an Eastern monastery and to come to Western shores. He taught me something of the inner side of his faith; he initiated me into the Buddhist methods of meditation; and he provided an unforgettable lesson in ethics by the beauty of his own personality. He lived the doctrine of love for all beings to its fullest extent; none was exempt from the sweep of his compassion.²⁰

The second influential person was a certain Mr. Thurston, an American painter living in London, portrayed in Michael Juste's novel as the character Brother M. Until his

¹⁸ Hurst, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁹ *Notebooks*, VIII, 4, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

death in the mid-twenties, he would occupy an important place in the life of the young Brunton. Thurston wrote *The Dayspring of Youth*, published posthumously in 1933,²¹ and from which the excerpt below could well have been written by Brunton himself:

Man is a prisoner within the atmosphere of this world, but his Higher Self awaits the time when he will release himself from bondage and return to it. This union can be accomplished if the student will but aspire and bring into activity those dormant properties of matter within him of which he has been unaware.²²

Among other early influences, the esoteric novel *Zanoni* of Edward Bulwer Lytton²³ seems to have particularly fascinated the heady and imaginative student:

How it opened a new and eerie world for me...! It gave me dark brooding ambitions. I, too, would take the path of the Rosicrucian neophyte and strive to fling aside the heavy curtain which hides the occult spheres from mortal gaze.²⁴

And also:

Youth to me was a perpetual quest, but I find the maturing ones of today incurious of any higher adventures than are afforded by cocktail bars and tennis courts. I remember how I was attracted to the literary portrayals of certain characters whom I felt must exist in real life, and whom I longed to meet. Was *Zanoni* a mere creature of the quill of Bulwer Lytton? Did not his prototype exist somewhere in unrecorded history, if not in the author's own experience?²⁵

Such was the idealistic and dreamy youth of the future Paul Brunton, who married in 1922. He had met Karen Tottrup in the milieu of young bohemian post-war London. An only son, Kenneth Thurston Hurst, was born of this union which lasted six years. It was subsequently as a solitary and free man that he would set out, at age thirty-two, on the great Quest which would take him to India from 1930 to 1947, interrupted by stays in Europe and the United States. Later on, he would recognize that his early life had been unbalanced, too far from practical realities and too easily given to pipe dreams. One

²¹ According to Hurst, op. cit., Thurston had also translated and annotated *Le Comte de Gabalis*, an occult classic (perhaps a Rosicrucian novel acc. to Riffard, op. cit., p. 969) written in 1652 by l'Abbé N. de Montfaucon de Villars.

²² Hurst, op. cit., p. 60.

²³ Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873), Member of Parliament, defender of radicalism, buried in Westminster Abbey, author of *The Last Days of Pompei*, was also a Rosicrucian, author of *Zanoni* (1844), founder of the *Fratres Lucis*, and Master of the *Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia*. (after Riffard, op. cit., p. 825.)

²⁴ *Notebooks*, VIII, 6, 202.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII, 3, 130.

might wonder if the emphasis on balance and moderation in his later writings was not due to this valuable autobiographical lesson. In any case, a turning point in the life of the youthful dreamer arrived with new family responsibilities and the necessity of earning a living:

The world insisted on a confrontation; its hard lessons had to be learned, my own fears and weaknesses exposed, intellect and practicality developed, science revalued for what it was worth, and the understanding why industry and materialism were growing to ever-greater power gotten.²⁶

The practice of journalism would help Brunton gain more maturity and psychological stability:

... We bless those earlier days which were spent in editorial work. For all editors tend to develop a touch of cynicism, to prize everything but to value nothing. Thus they are less easily fooled than most people, and less easily fool themselves. They will not so readily evade unpleasant facts nor avoid unpleasant deductions based on these facts. And they understand, too, that if we find in the world people of different mentalities, there are accordingly different views to suit them.²⁷

In fact, in his late twenties, Brunton founded a journal that seems as down-to-earth as all his previous activity had been idealistic and often fanciful. One might see in this curious episode without sequel either an effort to balance a too-dreamy temperament through deliberately practical activity, or a pragmatic approach to spirituality which strikes a European reader as typically Anglo-Saxon.

It was called *Success Magazine*, and it was designed for ambitious young men who dreamed, not of discovering other worlds, but of finding fame and fortune in this one. Brunton wrote almost all the articles, under pseudonyms, and devoted many pages to interviews with leaders of industry, the press, and finance. But, as humorously recounted by Kenneth Hurst,²⁸ the high-sounding magazine did not survive long, for it began at a most unfavorable moment—in 1929! The following year, Brunton embarked on his first tour of India: a new period in his life had begun.

1.3 Theosophy

We will not recount here the already well-known history of the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875 by Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott. Instead

²⁶ Ibid., VIII, 3, 55.

²⁷ Ibid., VIII, 4, 133.

²⁸ Hurst, op. cit., p. 68.

we will try to define the influence of this movement on Brunton, and precisely its place in the genesis of his quest.

One would need to be reminded today that for spiritual seekers in many countries at the turn of the century, Theosophy was considered a somewhat necessary step in the journey, in particular for those born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Its influence was felt in America, Europe, India, and equally in Russia, not surprisingly, as Blavatsky was herself Russian.²⁹

The Theosophical Society also played a significant role in the Hindu revival, as well as in the Indian nationalist awakening which followed. Gandhi first read the *Bhagavad Gita* in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation, during a student stay in London, at the prompting of two Theosophists. They presented him to Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant at a Theosophical Lodge, but he declined to join. Nevertheless, his encounter with Theosophy cured him of an inferiority complex in regard to Hinduism:

I recall having read, at the brothers' insistence, Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*. This book stimulated in me the desire to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition.³⁰

Pandit Subrahmanya Iyer, one of Brunton's main Indian teachers, was in his own words "a keen theosophist." Earlier in his life he had been a regular reader of Blavatsky's books, and was "several years in the clutches of Annie Besant."

Brunton himself was a member of the Theosophical Society for two years (most likely 1918-1920, in any case just after the First World War)³¹ before taking his distance from it.

We can judge his profound knowledge of the occult by the size of the *Notebooks* volume devoted to the subject (Volume XI: *The Sensitives*). Being himself prone to mediumship, during his early youth he explored psychic and paranormal phenomena such as hypnotism, spiritualism etc. In his *Notebooks*, he admits to youthful errors, drawn as he was to the experiences and powers promised by occultism. In the 1940s, he publicly repudiated certain passages of *A Search in Secret Egypt*³² in which the search for Truth

²⁹ Blavatsky wrote in English, however, and it was left to Helena Roerich, wife of Nicholas Roerich, to translate *The Secret Doctrine* into Russian. Theosophical ideas were passionately studied in the intellectual circles of pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg, affecting poets such as Aleksandr Blok, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Andrei Biely. Nicholas Roerich was influenced by Theosophy though he never was a member.

³⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Boston, 1957.

³¹ My search at the London Theosophic Society for the exact dates of Brunton's membership was unsuccessful.

³² *Secret Egypt* is beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on the Indian influence on Brunton.

was sacrificed to a love of mystery and the sensational. The *Notebooks* present a clear warning: occultism is inferior to mysticism, because it distracts one from the real goal. Nevertheless, it might suit natures too egotistical or intellectual to embrace the bare simplicity of *moksa* (spiritual liberation):

The higher and lower teachings are like oil and water. They cannot be mixed together and one day you will have to make your choice between them if you wish to progress and not to remain stagnating.³³

We will now look at Brunton's overall opinion of the Society, before examining more precisely his position in relation to Theosophy, all as stated in an unedited, undated essay, "Theosophy," most likely written in the 1940s.³⁴

Brunton's assessment of the Society was on the whole sympathetic and constructive. He did not hide his admiration and respect for the controversial Mme Blavatsky, but he was also aware of her weaknesses:

The larger world has yet to do her justice and recognize that she was a genius.... Notwithstanding this, I must also regret the faults in her character, the exaggerations in her writings and the lack of supporting evidence for her claims.

Brunton felt that the founding of the Society had been a positive sign, manifesting a wave of authentic spirituality. The ideas it sought to spread had been "the most valuable teaching given to humanity" in the nineteenth century. Yet for all its importance at that time, Theosophy seemed to Brunton obsolete and fated to decline. Having lost its spiritual vitality, the Society had become just another sect among others, beset by rifts and menaced by disintegration. Its historical value remained in its popularization of Eastern teachings hitherto unknown outside limited circles.³⁵ The new knowledge had a two-fold importance, weakening scientific materialism and promoting tolerance towards world religions.

Yet in Brunton's view, the germs of the Society's spiritual degeneration had been there from its inception, due to certain errors in emphasis by Mme Blavatsky herself. Brunton mentioned two: an excessive passion for mystery, and a preoccupation with "dark forces" pushed to an obsession (all the talk about black magicians and their shadowy brotherhoods etc.). On top of this, an open enrollment policy tended to attract too many seekers of miracles and the sensational. This explained for Brunton, at least in part, the Society's decline after the death of its founder. There was a lesson for him in all

³³ *Notebooks*, XI, 3, 101.

³⁴ "Theosophy," an unpublished article by Brunton found in the Brunton Archive at Wisdom's Goldenrod.

³⁵ We have already seen earlier the value of the Theosophic Society for Indians, among them Gandhi and Iyer.

of this: the state in which the Society found itself after half a century³⁶ dissuaded him from ever founding an organization himself. Its failure was obvious: its tendencies had become exactly opposite to its original aims:

The Theosophical Society, which was to emancipate mankind from all narrow sects, has itself become one of the narrowest of sects. The movement which was to acknowledge no Papacy itself possesses one of the strictest Papacies in the religious world,

emphasized Brunton, noting the collapse of Theosophy's idea of Universal Brotherhood. As for the notion of a White Brotherhood, living in Tibet in some mysterious way, and from whom Blavatsky would receive messages, this was in Brunton's words a "romantic fiction." He underscored the absence of proofs for the existence of her secret conclave of Mahatmas. Yet he did not entirely rule out the possibility that Blavatsky was able to benefit from the teachings of unknown and remarkable Masters. One thing remained clear to him: our true spiritual center is to be found within ourselves, and not in a secret land, whether Tibet or India.

Here is how Brunton situated himself in relation to the Society. He wrote:

Were theosophists more flexibly minded, they might see that I am trying to carry forward H.P.B.'s work to the next higher level, but to carry it forward in my own way for she made many mistakes.

Similarities first appeared at the level of method: Mme Blavatsky revealed her doctrine progressively (and also only in part) so as not to shock an unprepared public. Brunton unfolded his exposition of mentalism progressively, partly for the same reason, partly because his own understanding was still evolving. His audience was more or less the same as hers:

We are following a trail taken earlier by H.P.B. herself. She wrote, "We aim at raising the educated classes because through them the masses will be raised too."

Regarding their teachings, we may note some points of convergence and divergence. Brunton quotes from Blavatsky's *The Voice of the Silence* to confirm at least three points of his own teaching: 1. Sages should "serve"³⁷ and not "hide themselves away" in solitude. 2. Authentic sages are extremely rare. 3. The pursuit of Truth is the highest of aims. To these points we can add their shared emphasis on the doctrines of transmigration and karmic retribution.³⁸

³⁶ 7. Prof. Ernest Wood, for twenty years the Secretary of the Society's Adyar branch, admitted privately to Brunton in 1940, "The Theosophical Society is dead; it has no future."

³⁷ An important Neo-Hindu idea, reflecting the influence of Western missionaries and Theosophists.

³⁸ See Ch. 4.2 below for more about Theosophy's influence on Brunton's views of karma and evolution.

Finally:

Blavatsky was well acquainted with mentalism. Indeed how could she not be so, seeing she had studied in the best esoteric school in Tibet, the Yogacara, who make mentalism an essential tenet of their doctrine? ... If she did not mention mentalism in her public teaching, it was because materialistic science had, as a first step, to be led from belief in matter to belief in energy.

On the whole, Blavatsky's belief in energy as the ultimate reality would become an intermediate position between nineteenth-century science's materialism and Brunton's view of ultimate reality as Mind. He saw no fundamental disagreement between the energetic and mentalist points of view; one was just more advanced than the other. Twentieth-century science had produced new discoveries which permitted the reformulation of ultimate Truth from a higher point of view:

H.P.B. gave out the truth all the same, only it was truth seen from the lower standpoint, viz. that which splits the world into two co-existing realities, spirit and matter. This standpoint is called Sankhya here in India. The next higher standpoint (which I have taken) annihilates the division of spirit and matter by uniting both in Mind, the essence of which, when investigated ... will be shown to be the Overself.

As for divergences, one could suggest two: in terms of teachings, Theosophy's weak development of the metaphysical, and the emphasis it placed on an emotional mysticism, tended in Brunton's view to produce elated, unbalanced people. Brunton himself advocated a philosophic discipline which subordinated the emotions to reason, as a prerequisite to rational metaphysical enquiry.

In terms of spiritual practice, Blavatsky according to Brunton "set up [an] ascetic ideal in a world where external renunciation is quite out of tune," thus frequently producing impractical dreamers unadapted to modern life. Brunton considered the renunciate ideal impractical for modern seekers, and sought to propose one more compatible with life in the world. We will return later to this point.

1.4 The New Science

The work of the physicists Jeans, Eddington, Planck, and Heisenberg (more than Einstein, who refused to draw philosophic conclusions from his theory of relativity), became the vehicle for a new vision of the world which greatly influenced the generation which came of age in the 1930s. The insurmountable gap which had been felt to exist between science and religion up to that time had troubled many. Rom Landau, witnessing the arrival of the New Science, described the exultation many felt on hearing certain revolutionary theories expounded for the first time:

Science has begun to admit that the world of the spirit and the world of matter are not two antipodes.... A leading British astronomer, Sir James Jeans, confessed that the scientific conception of the universe in the past was mistaken, and that the borderline between the objective world, as it is manifested in nature, and the subjective one, as it expresses itself through the mind, hardly exists. In [a 1934 address at Cornell University], he said: "The Nature we study does not consist so much of something we perceive as of our perceptions, it is not the object ... but the relation itself. There is, in fact, no clear-cut division between the subject and object." Twenty years earlier, such a statement would have been sheer heresy. Likewise, a search for the Ultimate Reality that we usually call "God," a search along both intellectual and unorthodox lines, need not be regarded as either heresy or sacrilege.³⁹

And moreover:

Equally startling are the pronouncements of Sir A. Eddington.... He asserts that "the nature of all reality is spiritual." Sir Arthur represents an entirely new spirit in science, for he confesses "that the scientist has a much more mystic conception of the external world than he had in the last century."⁴⁰

Interestingly, Jeans' *The Mysterious Universe* was assigned reading in the philosophy courses taught by Subrahmanya Iyer⁴¹ to the monks of Mysore's Ramakrishna Ashram.

Paul Brunton himself sought the authority of eminent scientists in support of mentalism. His writings were full of citations from the great physicists, and he observed:

When a mystic like Brunton writes strongly in advocacy of a revolutionary doctrine like mentalism, it is only a negligible few who are likely to be convinced that it is a true doctrine. But when a first-class scientist like Sir James Jeans writes even mildly in advocacy of it in his authoritative books, many will begin to sit up and take notice. For the name of Brunton means little today whereas the name of Jeans must be regarded with respect.⁴²

In fact, Jeans himself used the word *mentalism* in his *Physics and Philosophy*, from which such passages as the following two probably influenced Brunton:

All this shows is that the waves cannot have any material or real existence apart from ourselves. They are not constituents of nature, but only of our efforts to understand nature....⁴³

³⁹ Rom Landau, *God is My Adventure*, London, 1935, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., p.224.

⁴¹ See Ch. 3 below.

⁴² *Notebooks*, VIII, 4, 8.

⁴³ Sir James Jeans, *Physics and Philosophy*, 1942 (repr. N.Y : Dover, 1981); extracts were found in a collection of various articles bound by Brunton, now in the Archive at Wisdom's Goldenrod.

And in conclusion:

What remains is in any case very different from the full-blooded matter and the forbidding materialism of the Victorian scientist. His objective and material universe is proved to consist of little more than constructs of our own minds. In this and in other ways, modern physics has moved in the direction of mentalism.⁴⁴

1.5 Independent Spiritual Seekers

1.5.1 Adventurers of the Spirit

I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author.... I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.⁴⁵

It might seem curious that this declaration by an American Trappist monk could be used to illustrate the way of spiritual independence. However, Thomas Merton, in the manner of the French Benedictines Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux,⁴⁶ claimed the right to go beyond the bounds of his own tradition in order to deepen his spiritual experience. The following statement could have been made by a lay person, even by Brunton himself:

So I ask you to do me just this one favor of considering me not as a figure representing any institution, but as a statusless person. And so I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free-floating existence under a state of risk. And ... if they are faithful to their own calling ... to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ We will discuss this further in Ch. 4.1c.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *Asian Journal*, Appendix 3: "The Monastic Experience and the Dialogue Between East and West"; Merton was the celebrated author of many books, among them *Zen, Tao and Nirvana* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

⁴⁶ We will here not speak of them, nor of Alexandra David-Neel. We have chosen to focus on Anglo-American seekers (or on Indians in the Anglo-Saxon orbit such as Krishnamurti), and among them, those who travelled or lived for a long while in India—with the exception of Guénon, a figure so important in France that we felt it necessary to compare him with Brunton.

⁴⁷ Merton, "Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism", an informal talk delivered in Calcutta, Oct. 1968.

Both of Merton's remarks could apply to several generations of "Adventurers of the Spirit" or "Pilgrims of the Absolute," individuals for whom a lively interest in scholarship remained secondary to a spiritual quest involving their whole being. If Brunton's case seems particularly interesting to us due to his lengthy and profound stay at the Source itself (i.e. his privileged connections with Indian teachers and a philosophizing that were all-in-all remarkable), he was nevertheless not unique, but rather representative of a whole trend. A generation born in the 1860s had paved the way for his. Strongly influenced by Theosophy, those earlier spiritual pioneers nevertheless insisted on retaining their freedom of movement. Their originality, independence, and strength of character, qualities which allowed such spiritual explorers as Sir Francis Younghusband, Nicolas Roerich, and Alexandra David-Neel⁴⁸ to rise above sectarianism to reach a spirit of universal sympathy, were again found in Brunton and others of his generation such as Arthur Osborne, Christopher Isherwood, Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and Rom Landau.⁴⁹

The figure closest to Brunton in temperament and destiny, was undoubtedly the British writer Arthur Osborne (1906-1970). Educated at Oxford, with the promise of a brilliant university career, he was disappointed by the general lack of interest in spirituality which he found in intellectual circles, and he "intuitively rejected research as a sterile use to which to put one's years of life."

His need for a spiritual path found no satisfaction in Oxford's atmosphere of dry erudition, nor in the indifference of a local clergy which seemed more attuned to social activity than to the mystic Quest:

Here were young men receiving the best education their country had to offer ... not even knowing that there was a goal to life, that there were paths leading to it, and that men had trod these paths and left records of their ascent. One of my friends took Sanskrit for his degree, and he also, during his years of study was never let into the secret that there is anything of spiritual interest in Sanskrit literature.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Younghusband, Roerich, and David-Neel maintained a passionate love for India and Tibet, and spent a great part of their lives there as both explorers and mystics—adventurers in the highest sense of the word. All were for a time close to the Theosophical movement, but none adopted its label.

⁴⁹ Christopher Isherwood, English novelist, settled in California on the eve of World War II, as did Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley. Like them, he became interested in Vedanta through the Los Angeles Ramakrishna Mission, having rejected in turn Puritanism and Marxism. Alan Watts, a fellow English emigré in California, had also rejected Puritanism and had also discovered Asia in the West through readings and encounters.

⁵⁰ This quote and the following are from "Oxford Rejected," Ch. 4 of Osborne's autobiography, published in *The Mountain Path*, v. 23:3 (July 1986).

This malaise caused Osborne to adopt a severely critical attitude towards contemporary life, one also characteristic of the young Brunton despite their different surroundings. They shared the same existential dissatisfaction as well as the same need of a spiritual goal (with a path and a guide):

The modern civilization uses men as instruments whether they be laborers or scholars. Education is in closed compartments. Just as a workman tends his own machine without consideration for his own development, so a scholar contributes his fragment of research totally alien to wisdom or self-knowledge. It is not true that society is greater than a man. An anthill is greater than the single ant that composes it, but man has a divinity in his nature which potentially contains and transcends this whole world; and a society which denies this by treating men as instruments, providing no means for their spiritual development, is eating out its own vitals. Traditionally it has always been held that the search for Truth or Knowledge is sacred and requires no motive or justification, that it is a fit end to which to devote one's life. That is true, but it refers to knowledge of direct or indirect spiritual import, knowledge which gradually illumines or transforms the seeker. The accumulation of mere factual knowledge is a parody.

One notices the resemblance to Merton. And in fact the salient trait common to all these Adventurers of the Spirit seems to be their claim to a knowledge other than the purely intellectual or practical one offered by Western society in their time.

Osborne was ripe for falling under the influence of René Guénon, which happened some time after he left Oxford. Guénon's *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* made a strong impression on him; "his uneasiness and dissatisfaction disappeared when he realized that life had sense after all."⁵¹ Having become an eager reader of Guénon, Osborne corresponded with him while translating into English his *Crisis of the Modern World*. Osborne then left with his wife for Thailand, where he taught at the University of Bangkok. Interned by the Japanese, it was not until after the war (fifteen years after Brunton's encounter with Ramana) that he went to Tiruvannamalai, where he settled for the rest of his life.⁵² He became a faithful disciple of Ramana Maharshi, whose works he edited and annotated.⁵³ After the Maharshi's death, he remained at the Ramana Ashram until his own death in 1970.⁵⁴ An ardent advocate of the study of comparative religion (to further mutual understanding and world

⁵¹ "Arthur Osborne," by his wife Lucia, in *The Mountain Path*, v. 7:4 (October 1970).

⁵² Though he did spend some years in Calcutta as director of a college.

⁵³ *The Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, London, 1959.

⁵⁴ In 1964, Osborne founded the ashram's monthly review, *The Mountain Path* (named after the sacred mountain Arunachala, symbol of the Guru, Siva, and the formless Absolute). Among his published works are *Buddhism and Christianity in the Light of Hinduism*, a study of Sai Baba of Shirdi, and many studies of Ramana Maharshi.

peace), Osborne saw religions as “different structures ... established on the same substratum of truth, or else ... different paths leading to the same mountain top.”⁵⁵ In his view, which would certainly have been seconded by Brunton,

A religion which could produce a St. Francis or a Meister Eckhart is a true religion whether its doctrine seems acceptable to me or not. It is also true of a religion which can produce a Ramakrishna or a Ramana Maharshi.

We will now turn to the life of Sir Francis Younghusband: a personal friend of Brunton's, he was prominent in the public eye as a mediator of East and West. At the turn of the twentieth century, he was already a true Adventurer of the Spirit; one in whose wake Osborne and Brunton would follow.

1.5.2 Sir Francis Younghusband

In 1934, Sir Francis wrote a laudatory preface to *A Search in Secret India*, the work which would establish Brunton's reputation. Later on Brunton would write:

Sir F. Younghusband—so distinguished as an authority on India—would not have lent his name, as writer of the Foreword to my book, if he thought I had composed an imaginary account. Even if he had nothing more, he had ample proofs in the large number of still unpublished photographs which he examined in London one afternoon at the Traveler's Club. But I am glad to feel that I enjoy his confidence on other and deeper grounds.⁵⁶

In Brunton's writings, Sir Francis is mentioned many times, always with warmth and respect, while in turn, Younghusband did not hesitate to confide in Brunton intimate episodes of his spiritual life.⁵⁷

Sir Francis Younghusband was born in 1863 in Murree, a mountain station on the northwest frontier of the British Raj. His ancestors served in the military in India for many generations, and the Victorian education which he received inculcated a respect for religion, duty, and the family tradition of service to the Crown, as well as control of the emotions, strength of character, and a virile independence. After finishing his studies at Sandhurst, he was appointed lieutenant at Meerut, but he soon found that his true vocation was to be an explorer. He was dispatched in reconnaissance of a territory on the

⁵⁵ This quote and the following are from an article in *The Mountain Path* (January 1969).

⁵⁶ *The Quest of the Overself*, ch. 1, p.16.

⁵⁷ For example, there was the mystical experience Younghusband had near Lhasa after the success of his mission in Tibet. More mysterious yet, was a meeting he had in the Gobi Desert with a strange Mongolian who powerfully influenced his spirit without saying a word. Brunton would later encounter the same man in Cambodia.

borders of the Empire. Some time later he was sent on a six-month mission to Manchuria. The region was rich in unexploited natural resources, and the Russians, the great rivals of the British on the Asian continent, looked to Manchuria with interest—two valuable reasons to send an emissary. Several months later, a double feat unique in the annals of exploration (crossing both the Gobi Desert and the Himalayas by a then unknown pass, the March of Muztagh) made Younghusband famous in the Anglo-Indian world. In addition, the prolonged solitude he experienced in nature strongly heightened his inner mystic propensities:

In the great stillness of the night the calm composure of the stars made me feel that I belonged quite as much to them as to this earth. We all seemed one together—my men and I, and the spotless mountains, and the radiant stars.

While living in the principality of Indore during the years 1902-03, Younghusband familiarized himself with Hindu philosophic and religious literature. Nanak Chand, Prime Minister of the Royal Council of Indore and a confirmed Vedantin, initiated him into the philosophy of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Thus prepared on all fronts by long years of contact with the multiple realities of India, Francis Younghusband experienced, at the age of forty, the most exalted adventure of his life: the expedition to Tibet.⁵⁸ The observations of Sir Francis concerning the average Lama clergy anticipate those of Roerich and David-Neel: he found them to be degenerate, ignorant, and tyrannical, wanting at all cost to maintain their own despotism by keeping the country closed to Westerners. The mission to Tibet twice won Younghusband knighthood: in 1904, he received the title of Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India; in 1917, King George V bestowed on him the superior title of the British Raj, Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire. It was there, in September 1904, that one of his most profound mystical experiences took place, recounted in his own words thirty four years later. He was far from Lhasa, alone in the mountains, when suddenly:

I was beside myself with untellable joy. The whole world was ablaze with the same ineffable bliss that was burning within me. I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world.... Joy is the ultimate ground of being; it is what counts in the long run, and what is most worth cultivating in higher and higher degrees till the last summit of perfection is reached and the Kingdom of Heaven is won.

⁵⁸ As related by Younghusband in his *India and Tibet*, this diplomatic-military mission, on which he was sent by Viceroy Lord Curzon himself, established diplomatic and commercial relations between England and the government of Lhasa. The treaty signed with the Tibetans, after serious difficulties, opened a new era in Tibetan-European relations:

"The real opening of Tibet to the white races took place in 1903 when Lord Curzon dispatched a mission to Tibet under Colonel Younghusband.... But for it, none of us who followed later could have gone and worked in Tibet." – Sir Charles Bell, who headed the second British mission to Lhasa in 1920.

Between the two wars, Sir Francis gave his attention to India's future, and wrote *Dawn in India*, which began to prepare the English public for the inevitable changes to come. His political position (close to Brunton's and that of certain neo-Hindu Anglophiles) was clear: Pax Britannica had been, all in all, incontestably beneficial for India.⁵⁹ Conscious that a premature departure by the British would be detrimental to India because of the risk of civil war, he nevertheless upheld India's right to decide its own destiny. He felt that the two cultures could enrich each other, each bringing something the other lacked, forming an alliance the political framework of which would have to be determined: "British practicality and Indian idealism are compatible and complementary."

In 1937, Sir Francis visited India after an absence of eighteen years. That same year, he organized a second World Congress of Faiths⁶⁰ at Oxford, following the first one held in London a year earlier.⁶¹ Their aim was more to promote mutual understanding than to amalgamate all religions into one. A Congress pamphlet grandly proclaimed:

The World Congress of Faiths is an inter-religious movement concerned with the awakening and strengthening of spiritual values, and provides a meeting place where all men and women of faith may, in fellowship, learn to understand one another's religion, where the seeker of Truth may find guidance, and where all may strive to realize the fundamental principles common to all the great spiritual teaching, transcending outward forms. The World Congress of Faiths aims to break down the barriers of exclusion and to build bridges between the faiths....

Among the bridge builders one could include Younghusband, Osborne, Merton, and Brunton himself.⁶²

The essence of Younghusband's spiritual outlook can be found in his *Life in the Stars* (1927) and *The Living Universe* (1933).⁶³ After his death in 1942, the *London Observer*

⁵⁹ Younghusband nevertheless criticized the British for their lack of understanding of, or sympathy for, Indian customs and values.

⁶⁰ The idea grew out of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, where Vivekananda gave his famous speech. After that, sessions of an International Congress of the History of Religions were held in Paris (1900), Basel (1904), Oxford (1908), Leyden (1912), and again Paris (1924).

⁶¹ For the 1936 Congress, Sir Francis secured the participation of Radhakrishnan for Hinduism, D.T. Suzuki for Zen Buddhism, and Nicholas Berdiaev for Eastern Christianity.

⁶² German novelist John Knittel said of *A Search in Secret India*, "In this book, a bridge has been built."

⁶³ The fundamental theme of these volumes is that the entire universe is spirit. Matter is but another name for energy, that is, spirit, manifesting itself in various degrees, from inorganic matter to human consciousness. A point which is interesting for us here is his insistence on the unique character of the human personality (shown by the Christian influence which persisted despite divergent beliefs) which is not, at the time of a mystical experience, absorbed into the impersonal, non-dual Spirit (which would be the

stated:

Indeed, his was a stereoscopic vision, which embraced the best of the Orient and the Occident. Although a good Christian he appreciated, nay revered, the spirit of Asia. He held that the soul of Hinduism and Buddhism was at one with the heart of Christianity. He was thus a real reconciler. He believed that the more intensely spiritual we became, the more quickly we would meet and mingle and broaden out into a happy brotherhood of man. This conviction led to the founding of the World Congress of Faiths, which owes practically everything to him. Sir Francis was sure ... that a new Renaissance was upon us. This is the marriage of East and West.

1.5.3 Guénon, Krishnamurti, and Brunton

Among the seekers and spiritual figures of the past century, there were some, such as Gandhi, Lanza del Vasto,⁶⁴ and René Guénon, who rejected modernity altogether. A more progressive and original approach was taken by Krishnamurti, who rebelled against the weight of the past, and thus of tradition, from which he wished to find freedom. Finally, a third way, Brunton's, sought to reconcile tradition and modernity in a creative synthesis.

The incisive intelligence of René Guénon,⁶⁵ his penetrating critique of the causes of the modern world's degeneration, and the impulse he gave to Traditional Studies in France, have been widely recognized. Yet Guénon during his lifetime readily posed as an authority on Indian Civilization, when in fact his travel experience was limited to the Islamic Near East (he died in Cairo in 1951). Moreover, his prejudice against the modern West influenced his view of the East.

By contrast, Paul Brunton had actually *lived* for a decade in the British Raj, in all sorts of surroundings. He had this to say about Guénon, after having first praised his metaphysical astuteness:

The East which he pictures in this book is not accurately represented. The process of

case in the Advaitic experience).

⁶⁴ Lanza del Vasto was an Italian aristocrat, b. 1901, author of *Le Pelerinage aux Sources*. On his return from India, he founded a community in the South of France, a kind of secular monastic order leading a primitive life in complete autarky. He and Brunton both spent 1937 in India: Del Vasto was with Gandhi, while Brunton was with Subrahmanya Iyer, who taught him Advaita Vedanta. Lanza del Vasto became an apostle of non-violence; he was an anti-modernist who wished to adapt Gandhism to Europe.

⁶⁵ Guénon recognized Brunton as an "awakener of souls." In a 1935 review of *Secret India* in *Le voile d'Isis*, he stated, "This book ... surely is worth more, in itself, than many other more pretentious volumes, and is able to awaken a sympathy for the Orient in its readers, and, in a few of them, an interest of a deeper sort."

Westernization and modernization which is today going on throughout the Orient is not merely skin deep, as he asserts, nor confined to a small minority of the younger generation whom he dismisses so contemptuously. On the contrary, it is a process which is penetrating deeply into the outlook and external life of the majority of the population. It is something which has come to stay because it is not as repugnant to the Easterner as Guénon asserts.⁶⁶ On this last point, Guénon might be correct; but *Hermit* was an early work, written before Brunton's meeting with Subrahmanya Iyer. Owing to his extreme point of view and limited experience, Guénon is unable to form a scientifically correct estimate of the inner and outer development through which the Oriental is passing.⁶⁷

Guénon, for example, vehemently criticized “Westernized Vedanta,” in particular that of Vivekananda—as well as attempts to present Vedanta from the perspective of modern science. Many of his criticisms were justified; still, he tended to reject the good with the bad, combining them all under the term “modern deviations.”

It came to this: was Advaita Vedanta *only* a cultural tradition limited by time and place; or did it *also* carry a universal message capable of taking root in a larger cultural sphere? For Neo-Vedantins such as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Tagore, and Radhakrishnan, as well as for Brunton, it was undeniably Vedanta’s universal message which was most important. In fact, that is why they sought to bring it up to date. For Guénon, by contrast, a narrow traditional orthodoxy was the most important thing, and thus it was absolutely necessary to “adhere completely to a well-defined tradition ... true membership, with all it implies, including the ritual practice of this tradition.”⁶⁸ Only after this could one ascend to the Primordial Tradition, the essence of all particular traditions.

But here a paradox appeared: Guénon repeated that of all traditions, it was Hinduism—and in particular, Advaita Vedanta—“that derives most directly from the Primordial Tradition.” Moreover it was to Advaita that he devoted most of his penetrating studies. In one passage he criticized the

vague ‘idealistic’ sympathy which makes certain Westerners declare themselves Hindus or Buddhists without knowing very well what it means, and, in any case, never dreaming of

⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, Guénon for his part was shocked by Brunton’s acceptance of progress and the West. In a 1937 review of Brunton’s *Hermit in the Himalayas*, he wrote:

“What is perhaps most curious in this book is the contradiction one constantly feels between certain of the author’s aspirations and his willingness to remain in spite of everything “a 20th-century man” (and we could add “a Westerner”). He resolves this contradiction for better or worse by creating his own conception of yoga, one which he himself qualifies as “heterodox,” and limits his spiritual ambitions to achieving a state of inner calm and equilibrium, in itself assuredly remarkable, but still far from a true metaphysical realization!” – reprinted in *Etudes sur l’Hindouisme*, Paris: Editions Traditionnelles, 1983.

⁶⁷ *Notebooks*, 10, I, 95.

⁶⁸ *Etudes sur l’Hindouisme*, Chapter: “Sanatana Dharma,” p. 116.

obtaining a true affiliation and aligning themselves with these traditions.⁶⁹

Yet in the traditional view, only born Hindus could receive the Vedic or Vedantic Revelation. Thus, by an irony of fate, Guénon, who so admired the orthodox Brahmins, had no chance to become one himself. But he *could* have been accepted by the Neo-Vedantins whose progressive ideas he himself rejected! Faced with the impossibility of joining the orthodoxy to which he had given so much of his energies, Guénon in the end converted to Islam! This leads us to the following observation:

Vedanta as a particular orthodox tradition closed to outsiders has been of limited interest to the world at large, remaining an object of study for scholars and philosophers. On the other hand, its essential truths could appeal to those Western or Westernized seekers too estranged from the Judeo-Christian tradition to find their spiritual roots there. If it were truly universal, it would not lose its essence in being reformulated or adapted to suit varying circumstances. But that would mean allowing a place for change or progress in one's picture of the world, and this Guénon could not do.

In denying that the decadent West had anything to offer to a perennially pure Orient,⁷⁰ Guénon rejected the inevitable unfolding of history. Seeing truth exclusively in a return to Tradition, he denied the evolution of sensibilities and human needs, which have always demanded a renewal of spiritual and philosophic truths. The Neo-Vedantic view, and Brunton's, was that the traditional East and modern West could complete and balance each other. In fact, Brunton's true originality lies in the fact that he takes evolution into account. If for Guénon, bringing Tradition up to date is unthinkable, for Brunton, it is necessary as a matter of survival. He thus offers a "third way" to those not drawn to materialism or traditional religions.

In sharp opposition to the traditionalism of Guénon is the iconoclasm of J. Krishnamurti. It was his wish to make a clean sweep of the past in order to arrive in the eternal Here and Now. There are interesting parallels in the lives of Krishnamurti and Brunton. The two were contemporaries (Krishnamurti was older by three years); they met several times; and their destinies were similar in that each would be chosen by Providence to present a teaching bridging East and West.

Krishnamurti, in childhood, was "recognized" by H.W. Leadbeater, then head of the Theosophical Society, as an incarnation of the "Christ-Messiah"—the coming World Teacher. As a result he was taken in hand by them, educated, and then invested with a mission. Brunton's experience at the Court of Mysore was similar in some respects, but

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ It was incredibly naïve, even hypocritical of Guénon, to systematically denigrate the modern world (he probably did not shun modern hygiene, medicine, means of communication, etc.), while exalting traditional cultures which also had their "shadow side" (c.f. the Hindu temples which lived off prostitution). Guénon's thought, brilliant as it was, is extreme, bordering on the fanatical, as well as lacking in realism.

here the roles were reversed: a Westerner was welcomed by Indians, and it was they who invested him with a mission. His mentor Iyer confided to him in 1937:

The late Maharaja of Mysore was so anxious to spread the philosophy of Advaita that he once said to me: "Here is Paul Brunton. He has a great gift with his pen and an aptitude for mysticism and philosophy. Let us keep him here in Mysore to study Advaita and then make it known to the West."⁷¹

Certainly the two missions would, at first, appear incommensurate: in Krishnamurti's case it was a matter of a World Teacher saving the world; in Brunton's it was only a matter of transmitting a teaching. Yet in both cases a shift occurred between the initially proposed mission and its concrete realization by the invested person: Krishnamurti, at the age of thirty-five, severed all ties with Theosophical organizations, and renounced the role they chose for him in order to promote his own original and iconoclastic spiritual teaching. Paul Brunton never severed the connection with his masters in Mysore, though he later distanced himself from the dry intellectualism of Iyer. But Brunton's teaching is a creative reformulation of Neo-Vedanta in his own modern language, in which one also discerns, to a lesser extent, the influences of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Christian esotericism, and Theosophy. Both Brunton and Krishnamurti present an original spiritual discourse containing both Eastern and Western elements, intended above all for a world-wide audience, but also reaching a good part of the Indian public.

In their teachings we see certain similarities: rejection of organizations, especially religious ones; rejection of the exterior signs of religion; reliance on an "Inner Teacher" over any outer one. Both refused either to become gurus or have disciples.⁷² Both were and wanted to remain outsiders, without label, and rejected all appurtenances and traditional orthodoxies. Both encouraged us to be 'in the world, but not of it.'

The metaphysical content of their teachings is the same: the ego is but a bundle of memories and desires, i.e. ultimately, thoughts. Thoughts, being impermanent, changing, and always conditioned by the past, are powerless to attain the Real, which by its very nature—infinite, incommensurable, unconditioned—escapes them. Ultimate Truth is rather to be found in silence, thought renouncing itself. We must live in the here and now. The two express this point a bit differently: for Krishnamurti, one must let go of yesterday and all that has passed, and be reborn at each moment. Brunton uses a more mystical language: we must find the Void which resides as a tiny divine atom in the heart of each of us, beneath the surface of our personality—the sacred Void, which is Plenitude, Peace, and our true home. And though the world daily demands our participation, it is sufficient to respond with a part of our being, while our most intimate feelings remain identified with this secret atom of the Void. In this way, our deepest "I"

⁷¹ Notes by Brunton, Archive at Wisdom's Goldenrod.

⁷² Brunton was more discreet and unassuming, preferring private interviews to contact with crowds.

rests perpetually immersed in Absolute Peace.

While their ultimate message might be essentially the same, important differences nevertheless separate the two. If both, unlike Guénon, became sages outside orthodox traditions, it was only Krishnamurti who rejected all traditions.

In this respect, Krishnamurti's teaching seems essentially negative, a potent but bitter medicine for those imprisoned by institutional cults. He breaks the student's bonds, but then leads him to a vast desert where he abandons him. The ultimate state of consciousness he describes is that of the traditional sage or fully enlightened being, but he does not show us the process leading to the realization of this state. He describes marvelously the goal, but does not indicate the steps to be taken: his recurring phrases "unified consciousness" and "let go" are not a roadmap.⁷³ What Krishnamurti describes to perfection is the awakening to Reality—the realization that pure Consciousness alone *is*, that the perpetually fluctuating and evanescent contents of the mind derive from *it*. This awakening effectively happens in an instant. But in order for the lightning flash to take place, resulting in a firm and unshakable certitude, a long labor is necessary, which he seems to underestimate. "Truth is a pathless land" is his answer.

Brunton's teaching appears more positive. For him, the ways to Truth are many; what is important is not to so restrict ourselves to one path that we imagine that all the others are false. Thus if Guénon demands that we follow one particular traditional path, and if Krishnamurti asks us to abandon all paths, Brunton invites us to take an independent way, the fruit of his adaptation and synthesis of several traditions (among which, according to us, Advaita is primary).

A pragmatist, Paul Brunton is always aware of the effort needed to reach the goal. He recommends following two parallel paths: the *Short Path*—a mystical path of identification with the Divine Overself—and the *Long Path*—an ascetic path in which the disciplining of senses and mind gradually wears down the ego and leads to the success of the Short Path:

Thus, the actual finding of Truth, which is the same as Nirvana, Self-Knowledge, Liberation, is really a work of brief duration—perhaps a matter of minutes—whereas the preparation and

⁷³ Krishnamurti asks us to "see" our condition clearly, and thus achieve the leap into the Absolute, the Unconditioned, liberating us once and for all from the prison of the ego. He seems to have forgotten that we are creatures of desire, attached to a vicious cycle of pleasure and pain. Its cessation comes for most of us only at the end of a long process of inner work, over one or more lifetimes. Indeed, pleasure and pain are not entirely culturally conditioned; animals too seek pleasure and try to avoid pain. These tendencies (= *vasanas*, unconscious tendencies surviving in seed form from one incarnation to the next, animating creatures as if they were puppets; their complete elimination is generally the outcome of a very long discipline) are inborn, whether embedded in our genetic code or inherited from previous lives. To expect a radical detachment from our tendencies by an instantaneous metamorphosis seems a bit utopian despite rare instances of sudden grace.

equipment of oneself to find it must take many incarnations.

The practice of the two paths will be examined in more detail in Chapter 6 of this work.

Chapter 2: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

2.1 The Three Journeys

In 1930, after two years of intensive study in London at the library of the Secretary of State for India, Paul Brunton embarked for Bombay, setting out on his first grand voyage in search of yogis and sages. After stays in Bombay and Poona, he went down across the Deccan to Madras, where he stayed for some time. In the same month, he had two important meetings in South India: with Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram and Ramana Maharshi.

After a brief sojourn with the Maharshi, Brunton returned to Calcutta by train. A travelling companion gave him the address of Master Mahasaya, one of the first disciples of Ramakrishna, and Brunton went to see him following his arrival at the capital of Bengal. The aura of serenity which emanated from the aged master made a strong impression on him; Mahasaya prefigured the much more powerful figure of Ramana. Brunton then went to Benares where he stayed for some time. Pandit Gopinath Kaviraj, Director of the Benares State College of Sanskrit, brought him to his own guru, the miracle worker Vishudananda, who performed several feats of magic before Brunton's astonished eyes, reviving a dead sparrow which fluttered for a few minutes before finally passing away. Back in Benares he met the astrologer Sudei Babu, who gave him the following prophecy: "The world will become your home. You shall travel far and wide, yet always you will carry a pen and do your writing work." The astrologer offered to teach Brunton the "yoga of Brahma Chinta," reputedly of Tibetan origin. Brunton gave up the idea of including this practice in *A Search in Secret India*, feeling it too foreign to the Western mentality, but he did mention it there briefly with a warning:

It is neither right nor necessary for the average European to take up the practice of a method which is fit only for jungle retreats or mountain monasteries, and which might even prove dangerous. Insanity lies around the corner for Western amateurs who dabble in such practices.⁷⁴

This lucid remark would be repeated in various ways many times in his writings. Brunton never "went native"; he never erroneously believed that one could entirely adopt a way of life and thinking rooted in a culture so remote in time and space. In spite of his attraction to India, at first colored by romanticism, the pragmatist in him always kept him from falling into Utopian dreams.

Brunton continued his wanderings across North India, visiting Lucknow and Agra, and discovering the model colony of Dayalbagh near Agra. Then he went to Nasik, on the road to Bombay, and stayed with Meher Baba, a "Messiah" whom he had met on his arrival in India. Brunton had initially promised to stay with him an entire month;

⁷⁴ *A Search in Secret India*, p. 217, footnote.

however, it did not take him long to diagnose in the person of Meher Baba a mystic close to paranoia.

Without tarrying further, Brunton resumed his journey, this time by car and with an Indian chauffeur, as his health had begun to suffer as a result of the long months of travel in often Spartan conditions. He wandered throughout western India without a clear goal, until an uncanny meeting precipitated his return to Bombay: in a small village, a wandering yogi named Chandi Das foretold the following three things: 1. He should return to Bombay if he wished to fulfill his quest. 2. On his return to the West, he would contract a serious illness. 3. He would return twice more to India; these returns would be due to karmic ties with a sage who even now waited for him somewhere on Indian soil. Brunton listened, incredulous, to these three prophecies (which all came true); nevertheless he left for Bombay.

There he experienced a period of great confusion. His physical weakness worsened due to depression. In his extreme weariness, it seemed to him that his quest had been fruitless, that nothing remained for him but to return to Europe empty-handed. Suddenly two unexpected events took place, one inner, the other outer. An inner voice urged him to reexamine all the episodes of his quest. From the many persons he had met, a sole figure emerged clearly and persistently—that of Ramana Maharshi. Brunton realized that it was Ramana who had most strongly and deeply impressed him. An intense inner struggle followed: should he return to the Maharshi? But the return ticket to Europe had already been bought, and Brunton was now physically weak and emotionally drained. Moreover, the sage was living in the South, far from Bombay, from where the ships sailed for Europe. At last, the inner voice convinced him, and he decided to cancel his return to England and rejoin the Maharshi. By a strange coincidence, he received a letter from a disciple of the sage (an unaddressed letter which had been following him across the entire subcontinent) encouraging him to return. Taking this as a favorable omen, Brunton left for Tiruvannamalai.

His second stay with Ramana in 1931⁷⁵ lasted several weeks. This decisive encounter would confirm the mystical experiences he had already had his youth. In *Secret India*, however, it was rather presented as a spiritual turning point. Why this alteration in a book so autobiographical and intimate? Perhaps in order to allow the reader to more easily identify with the author. Throughout his quest, Brunton as narrator revealed a two-sided persona: there was the skeptic with a sharply critical mind, and the romantic with a taste for adventure. A large portion of the public could relate to this. And in fact, *Secret India* had an immediate success and made its author known throughout a large part of the world.

Brunton's stay in Tiruvannamalai was the spiritual high point of his initial journey to

⁷⁵ described in *Secret India*, Chapter 16, "In a Jungle Hermitage."

India, in spite of the author's deteriorating physical condition. Unfortunately, a telegram forced him to return to England for financial and professional reasons.

On returning to London, his condition worsened, and the fever contracted in India lasted intermittently almost another two years. Between attacks of fever, he divided his time between his studies—frequenting the libraries of the State Secretary of India, the Royal Asiatic Society, and the Oriental Section of the British Museum—and his work as a correspondent for the *Madras Sunday Times*. It was also during this time (1932-33) that he wrote *A Search in Secret India*. For this purpose, he retreated to an old village in Buckinghamshire, where each Sunday he joined a Quaker community⁷⁶ which met to debate theological and metaphysical questions. The book was published in 1934.

After a stay in Egypt that lasted several months, Brunton left in 1935 on his second voyage to India. He spent the winter with Ramana Maharshi in Tiruvannamalai and within a few weeks wrote the brief but forceful volume *A Message from Arunachala*. Published in 1936, it shocked numerous readers by the severity of its condemnation of contemporary mores.

In January 1936 Brunton left for Pithapuram (in northeastern India, on the Indian Ocean), hoping to meet Venkatarathnam Naidu, the head of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformed Hindu sect whose principles and practices Brunton wanted to study. He spent time with the local Maharaja as well, and wrote a very favorable article on him which was published by the newspaper *The Leader* in September 1936. In March he gave a lecture in Chidambaram, South India.

The four months of summer 1936 were devoted to a unique experience: a retreat in complete solitude in the heart of the Himalayas. In fact, Brunton wished to go to Tibet and made many attempts, entirely fruitless, in this direction. Certain official high-level relations existed between the English and the Tibetans, dating from the British military operations of 1904; however, Tibet remained fiercely indrawn, and denied access to all foreigners other than official representatives of the Empire. Brunton would make the same appeal, without success, to the Viceroy of India. Being a loyal subject, he resigned himself to the outcome, and refused a tempting offer from a yogi friend who proposed that Brunton disguise himself as a beggar and clandestinely accompany him into Tibet (as Alexandra David-Neel had done). Instead, Brunton contented himself to linger in the small Himalayan kingdom of Tehri-Garwal, which suited his purpose by its isolation, its calm and the grandiose beauty of its countryside. His self-imposed task could be summed up in three words: *to be still*. Remaining in silence, he plunged into deep, profound meditation. He kept a journal, published in 1937 as *A Hermit in the Himalayas*.

⁷⁶ For which he always felt an affinity. Quaker communities remain, along with Catholic monasteries, according to Alan Watts, among the last refuges of authentic Christian spirituality. – Watts, *Beyond Theology*, N.Y., 1973, p. 83.

Brunton was then invited to the court of Mysore by its Maharaja, who had read his books and wished to meet him. He spent the winter and spring of 1937 in Mysore, frequenting there the seminars on Vedantic philosophy given to the Ramakrishna monks by pandit Subrahmanya Iyer, the Maharaja's guru.

On July 17, 1937, Brunton embarked aboard the P&O Liner Maloja and arrived at his destination of Marseille on the 30th. He was in the company of Swami Siddheswarananda—a friend and fellow student from the Mysore ashram—and their master Subrahmanya Iyer. On July 31 the three went to Paris, where the Ninth International Congress of Philosophy opened on the 1st of August. It was organized by the University of Paris and held at the Sorbonne, for the Tricentennial of Descartes; Subrahmanya Iyer was the only delegate from India. Brunton spent some time in Europe, notably in Switzerland. He needed peaceful surroundings in order to write his first big spiritual work, *The Quest of the Overself*. The first draft had been written at the mountain retreat of Mount Kemmangandi, graciously put at his disposal by the Maharaja. Not surprisingly and moreover significantly, the work was dedicated to his royal patron. *The Quest* is Brunton's first comprehensive work, in that it presents clear, well constructed ideas, though it does not attain the profundity or the breadth of *The Wisdom of the Overself*. Seven years after his first arrival in India, and perhaps more than twenty years after his first mystical experiences, Brunton's philosophic wisdom had deepened and matured.

Brunton passed the winter of 1937-38 in London. There he continued his literary and journalistic activity, contributing most notably to the weekly revue *The Spectator*. Philosophical arguments inspired by the Indian philosophy he had acquired in India elicited the criticism of certain journalists, and he wrote to Swami Siddheshwarananda for advice. In February-March 1938, he was en route to Paris, where he met with his wife after a separation of many years. If their meeting did not end with the total reconciliation that he had hoped for, it did end nevertheless in restoring amicable relations.

His destiny, however, was to roam the world. Brunton's health had always been fragile, but it gravely deteriorated in the cold and damp climate of London. He developed tuberculosis, and the doctors ordered him to change climates in order to avoid a premature death. (His own mother died of this same illness at about the same age.) His choice settled on California, which had a contrasting climate, dry and warm, and was English-speaking—important for someone who led a life of diverse literary activity. Towards April, he found himself aboard the Queen Mary en route to New York, and he left ten days later for Los Angeles. His health did not improve to any great extent, and he complained that he could not go to Rome where, at a cycle of lectures at the Royal Oriental Institute, he had hoped to interview Mussolini. Nevertheless, his life remained one of fervent intellectual activity. He thought about writing a big work on Vedanta (which, in that form, never materialized), and corresponded with his venerable master Iyer, always including his respectful salutations to the Maharaja of Mysore and his

younger brother, the Yuvaraja.

On December 23, 1938, Brunton embarked by way of Japan on his third big tour of India. He wrote to Iyer of his plans in a letter dated December 10: he would arrive in India the second week of February, spend three months with Ramana Maharshi, then pass three months in Mysore. He hoped to spend the hot season at the mountain retreats put at his disposal by the Maharaja, at Kemmangandi or at Fernhill, and he hoped for the company of the royal guru and his help on the big work he was preparing to write. But severe storms in the Pacific were to change his plans: forced to return to Japan, he took the opportunity to study Zen Buddhism. He then went to China for several months in order to deepen his knowledge of the Taoist school. A letter to Iyer posted from Bangkok dated February 7, 1939 reveals that Brunton's studies continued in Siam, this time on Theravada Buddhism. He then went to Cambodia, where a visit to Angkor Wat impressed him deeply. There he met an extraordinary figure about whom we know nothing save that he was a grand lama in exile from Mongolia: "From him," wrote Brunton, "I received esoteric instruction personally unforgettable.... He gave me a teaching which would form the basis of Mentalism."

The Far Eastern excursion, particularly the meeting at Angkor, arranged by propitious destiny, would enlarge the author's philosophic horizon. His subsequent writings would depart somewhat from the strictly Indian context to become more encompassing:

All this is but a preamble to the statement that with these volumes a doctrine is presented which in all essential principles is not a local Indian tradition but an all-Asiatic one. According to the testimony of this philosopher who personally initiated me into the Yaka-kulgan⁷⁷ (Mongolian) metaphysical school, which studies a particular phase of this doctrine, so far as India is concerned the teaching spread there from its original home in Central Asia.⁷⁸

Brunton passed February 1939 savoring the beauty of Ceylon. In March he arrived at Tiruvannamalai, where he stayed at Ramana's ashram, not for the expected three months, but for three weeks, just enough time to resolve

... a highly deplorable situation in the Ramana ashram which represents the culminating crisis of a degeneration which has been going on and worsening during the last three years.⁷⁹

He described the situation briefly in a letter to Iyer, adding that he would give him all the details in person. The unpleasant episode served to open the author's eyes to certain negative aspects of ashram life in India and elsewhere. Ramana's ashram was at that

⁷⁷ = Mahayana Buddhist.

⁷⁸ *The Wisdom of the Overself*, introduction.

⁷⁹ Letter from Brunton to Iyer; copy in Brunton Archive.

time under the influence of the *Sarvadhikari* (Intendant General), who instigated dark intrigues in order to drive the Maharshi's most senior disciples from the ashram. He wished to replace them with his own clique in order to gain control over the ashram and thus exploit it for his own personal ends. Several disciples had already been turned away, and Brunton's time had come. The *Sarvadhikari* launched a slanderous campaign against him, which the local press echoed. This caused considerable damage to Brunton's image in Indian public opinion. He defended himself as well as he could, given that he was an Englishman at a time when British dominance was increasingly resented. Moreover, his privileged ties with the Maharshi, the Maharaja, and Iyer had excited not a little jealousy.

In early April 1939, Paul Brunton left Tiruvannamalai forever. He would never see the Maharshi again. Invited by the Maharaja, he stayed at Ootacamund (familiarily Ooty), a pleasant resort in the Nilgiri Mountains. Krishnaraja retired there each year during the hot summer months, accompanied by his master of philosophy. Brunton stayed for several months; the agreeable atmosphere restored his health, strained by the long months of Far-Eastern travel and the depressing struggle against human pettiness in the furnace of Tiruvannamalai.

These few months in the mountains near Mysore, in the stimulating company of Subrahmanya Iyer, were among the most intellectually fruitful, and possibly also the happiest, years of his life. Brunton devoted all his energies to what became his major works—*The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, published in 1941, and *The Wisdom of the Overself*, which followed two years after.

In December 1939, Brunton traveled to the southern tip of India, to the state of Travancore (now Kerala), where he met with the local Indian and English intelligentsia. He missed Iyer. In May 1940, he returned to the Nilgiris, accompanied by the Yuvaraja of Mysore. Brunton loved the tiny village of Ooty, and he asked permission to stay there until after the big celebration in Mysore for the Maharaja's birthday. Permission granted, Brunton did not return to Mysore until June 18, thus avoiding the crowds and commotion.

On August 3, Brunton was back in Mysore for another state occasion, this time a less happy one: the cremation of the Maharaja, who had died prematurely in his fifty sixth year. Krishnaraja did not live to see Brunton's major works, to which his kind support, material and intellectual as well as personal, had contributed so much.

Brunton remained in India until 1947. Interviewed in Bombay by the newspaper *Blitz* on July 12, 1941, he revealed that he had offered his services, both intellectual and practical, to the British war effort.⁸⁰ During the war years, he made radio broadcasts from Mysore, on themes such as "The Spiritual Meaning of the War." In September 1943, he made similar broadcasts from Madras for Ceylon Radio.

⁸⁰ A small scrapbook of clippings in the Archive contains bits of information about Brunton's work during the war.

2.2 Brief Encounters

Brunton's Indian encounters, so important for the formation of his world view, might be arranged in the form of a triangle, its three points corresponding to three human types: the mystic, the man of action, and the savant—all three, in spite of their apparent diversity, are animated by the same philosophic outlook. Brunton would meet these three in the persons of, first, Ramana Maharshi, then, several years later, the Maharaja of Mysore, and finally, pandit Subrahmanya Iyer. It is interesting to observe that these three individuals corresponded as well to the three aspects of Brunton's final definition of the ideal "philosophic life": contemplation, selfless service, and study. We will see that if, in the end, Brunton distanced himself from Iyer as well as the Maharshi, his attitude towards the Maharaja remained unchanged. This might be explained by the fact that the latter exercised only an indirect influence over him, whereas the other two impacted directly his spiritual and philosophic outlook. Brunton dedicated a volume to each of the three: to Ramana, the brief and succinct *Message from Arunachala*, a denouncement of the ills of the contemporary West; to Iyer, his one work in academic style, *Indian Philosophy and Modern Culture*; finally, to the Maharaja, *The Quest of the Overself*.

But these major, decisive encounters did not magically occur the moment Brunton set foot on Indian soil. The author was led to these key figures in the course of his long wanderings about the subcontinent (well described in *Secret India*). There were other, briefer encounters with great individuals, at least three of which were of particular importance for the author's life and vision.

2.2.1 Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram

The Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram is presented in *Secret India* as the sixty-sixth title holder in the venerable lineage which began with the celebrated Shankara of the eighth century. His meeting with Brunton, fleeting as it was, was crucial to the author's future direction. The episode is described in the chapter entitled "With the Spiritual Head of South India," in the intimate tone which makes the book so charming. The meeting took place in 1930 in the village of Chingleput; the two men were introduced by the Indian writer Venkataramani. It was the first interview granted to a European by the Shankara, who had been enthroned in 1907 at the age of twelve. Brunton was favorably impressed by the master's tolerance and broad-mindedness. The sage had moved beyond narrowly orthodox attitudes of superiority:

Sri Shankara does not decry the West in order to exalt the East, as so many in his land do. He admits that each half of the globe possesses its own set of virtues and vices, and in this way they are roughly equal! He hopes that a wiser generation will fuse the best points of Asiatic

and European civilizations into a higher and balanced social scheme.⁸¹

This balanced view attracted Brunton; opposed to the fanaticism and sectarianism so often found in religious and esoteric circles, he wished to maintain a harmonious balance in his thinking and way of life. In his interview with Shankara, Brunton asked for his advice in finding a yoga master. He was given two names: the second was that of Ramana Maharshi. However, Brunton was already planning to leave South India. Shankara abandoned his usual reserve to firmly insist that the writer change his plans: Brunton must meet the Maharshi before leaving. Surprised, Brunton promised to prolong his stay, and that same evening he decided to visit the Sage of Arunachala.

This momentous interview with the spiritual heir of the philosopher Shankara foreshadowed in many ways the subsequent unfolding of Brunton's quest. First of all, it was Shankara who placed him directly on the path to Ramana—the first intervention of destiny in the existential adventure of Brunton's quest. Much later, Brunton learned from an Indian friend the following prophecy which Shankara had given him: “Your friend will travel all round India... But, in the end, he will have to return to the Maharshi. For him, the Maharshi alone is the right Master.”⁸²

On the other hand, the serene figure of Sri Shankara, haloed in spirituality, bathed in the light of a perfect interior knowing, prefigured the character of Ramana Maharshi himself. Brunton in his memoirs placed both sages on the same highest plane of spiritual realization:

Both His Holiness Shankaracharya of Kanchi and Ramana Maharshi were met within the same month of 1930. I had prepared myself by nearly two years' intensive study, principally with the help of the secretary of state for India's library in London. Now more than fifty years have passed and there has been sufficient time to get a little more knowledge and understanding of these two sages and to watch the effects of their persons and teachings upon others.⁸³

Later on, in his search for a way beyond yogic mysticism, Brunton would turn to the writings of the original Shankara, the illustrious founder of the lineage of Shankaracharyas.

2.2.2 Sahabji Maharaj

Another figure encountered by Brunton was Sahabji Maharaj, leader of the Radha

⁸¹ *A Search in Secret India*, p128.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ch.XV, p. 276.

⁸³ *Notebooks*, VIII, 6, 150.

Soami sect. The sect was founded in 1861 by a banker of Agra, Radha Soami Dayal, who was from a Vishnuite family of the *ksatriya* caste. Sahabji Maharaj was the fourth guru in the lineage.⁸⁴

Who were the Radha Soamis? We might first note the parallel drawn by Farquhar between them and the Theosophists:

Nothing is more noteworthy than the many points in which Radha Soami and Theosophical doctrine and practice coincide. The most important items are: the unknowable Supreme, the spheres and their regents ... reincarnation, the use of methodical exercises ... of a hypnotic character for the development of the spiritual powers and of the photograph of the guru in meditation, the worship of gurus, the supernatural powers of the gurus, the claim that the teaching of the sect is scientifically accurate and verifiable in every particular, esoteric teaching, secret practice, and all the talk about astral and higher planes, adepts and such like.⁸⁵

Knowing that Brunton had been for two years a member of the Theosophical Society, it is easier for us to understand his enthusiasm for the Radha Soamis: they were close to the Theosophists in their wish to bridge the religions of East and West, and in their readiness to reconcile mysticism and modern science.

An entire chapter of *Secret India* is devoted to the Radha Soamis and their spiritual leader. In addition, the latter is mentioned in two other places in Brunton's writings:

... when I re-visited Dayalbagh, near Agra, last year (in 1936) in the company of my friend, Major Francis Yeats-Brown, his Holiness the late Sir Sahabji Maharaj was kind enough to remark, when all three of us were at lunch, that my published account of interviews with him had evinced an amazingly accurate memory.⁸⁶

And also:

I called the Viceroy. His Excellency had read my book *A Search in Secret India* and, as a direct result, has made a visit to inspect Dayalbagh, the cooperative city founded on spirituality to which I devoted a chapter. He was so satisfied with what he saw of the founder of the city, Sahabji Maharaj, that he made him a knight when the honorary list of the new year was published.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Farquhar (*Modern Religious Movements in India*, New Delhi, 1977, cites two other masters who succeeded the founder: Huzoor Maharaj, (1828-1898) of the *kayastha* caste, and a Bengali brahmin, (1861-1907) who was born in Benares.

⁸⁵ Farquhar, op.cit.

⁸⁶ *The Quest of the Overself*, chapter 1: "A Writer on his Writings."

⁸⁷ *A Hermit in the Himalayas*.

These remarks show that *Secret India* was widely read and appreciated in India, by Indians as well as in British official circles.

How did Brunton come in contact with the curious universe of the Radha Soamis? As always, by means of certain minor characters who seemed to abound in the labyrinth of his quest—in this case, two disciples of Sahabji Maharaj: Sunderlal Nigam, met in Lucknow; and Mallik, encountered “at another place and time.” The two spoke with him about their master, who had “conceived the astonishing and interesting notion of combining a yoga discipline with a daily life based on Western ways and ideas.”

Brunton was intrigued by this synthesis, which in a way foreshadowed the path he himself would take. He received an invitation from Sahabji Maharaj, the “uncrowned king” of Dayalbagh, a colony of the sect near Agra. Brunton was favorably impressed by this model city, founded by S. Maharaj in 1915. It had 12,000 inhabitants, and was considered the headquarters of the sect, which had some 110,000 members dispersed throughout India. During his stay, Brunton divided his time between interviews with S. Maharaj, visits to factories and schools, and participation in spiritual gatherings of the Radha Soamis. The city was founded on a cooperative principle: the welfare of the community came before that of the individual. The lands, houses, farms, businesses, and schools were community owned. The colony’s inhabitants were educated pioneers, willing to make the needed financial sacrifices out of love for their spiritual ideal.

Sahabji Maharaj had met with Gandhi, but refused to join his campaign of civil disobedience. He disagreed with the Hindu nationalist leader on two crucial points: for Sahabji, the practical regeneration of the individual came first, before political action (this was also Brunton's position); and he rejected Gandhi’s economic ideas as utopian and impractical. Sahabji Maharaj advocated a moderate industrialization of India which would avoid the mistakes of both capitalism and socialism—and which would safeguard spiritual ideas and practices.

In his first interview with Sahabji Maharaj, Brunton expressed to him the admiration he felt for his disciples. The response of the Radha Soamis’ leader summarized his world view:

I am attempting to show the world ... that a man can be perfectly spiritual without running away to caves, and that he can reach the highest attainments in Yoga while carrying on with worldly avocations.⁸⁸

The view is close to Brunton’s. According to Sahabji Maharaj, man has a triple nature: the body, which was put to work on Dayalbagh’s farms and in its trades; the intellect, to whose development were devoted its colleges and libraries; and the spirit,

⁸⁸ *Secret India*, p. 230.

which unfolded and flowered in communal chanting, meditation, prayer, and the gatherings led by S. Maharaj.

If Brunton was struck by the unique character of the Radha Soamis, if he intensely admired their mixture of pragmatism and spirituality, he was positively transported with enthusiasm for Sahabji Maharaj, “a brilliant and breath-taking man.”[v] He was not yet dreaming of his decisive meeting with the Maharaja of Mysore, and wrote with a trace of sadness:

Nowhere in India, nowhere in the entire world, may I expect to meet his like again.⁸⁹ [v]

The only negative note in his exalted sojourn at Dayalbagh was that Brunton did not have a spiritual experience with the Radha Soamis, and it was for that that he had come to India—not to report on Indian communities, as admirable as their realizations might be.

In the same way that Sri Shankaracharya prefigured Ramana Maharshi as an embodiment of the Sage of Supreme Realization—in the same way, Sahabji Maharaj prefigured the Maharaja of Mysore, a philosopher-man of action, the philosopher king who had yet to appear in Brunton’s life.

2.2.3 Sri Krishna Menon (Atmananda)

A third individual encountered by Brunton, Sri Krishna Menon (also known as Atmananda) was, like Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, a figure of prime importance in the spiritual landscape of the waning British Raj. In several ways, Krishna Menon resembled Subrahmanya Iyer, the great pandit of Mysore. Like the latter, Krishna Menon was a *grihastha* (householder). He occupied an important post in the police force of the state of Travancore (and in fact had written their Code). Like Iyer, he taught an intellectual form of Advaita which appealed exclusively to reason; also like Iyer, he felt that religion and yoga were inferior stages on the path of *jnana* (knowledge), and that meditation was superfluous. Both of them based their teachings on the fundamental tenets of *avasthatraya* (the three states of consciousness) and *drg-drsya viveka* (discriminating the knower from the known); both favored the *Astavakra-Gita*.⁹⁰ But in this case, Atmananda did not prefigure Subrahmanya Iyer: it is probable, in fact, that Brunton did not meet Atmananda until 1940, i.e. after the crucial period in Mysore. Brunton would return two more times to South India after its independence: in 1952, to participate in an initiation given by Atmananda to a group of his disciples in Trivandrum; then in 1953, to Bangalore, where he saw the master again, probably for the last time. After that, it appears that Brunton was no longer seeking out spiritual teachers.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 239.

⁹⁰ The Brunton Archive contains two versions of this same text, accompanied by the commentary of Iyer and that of Atmananda.

Atmananda's fundamental position did not seem to differ from Iyer's save for a more extreme idealism in which there was no place for practical wisdom or altruistic ideals. Thus Brunton noted:

From the heights where Krishna Menon stands, the prospect of a world war means little: an illusion within an illusion!

And also:

The suffering humanity of a dream does not expect our help, nor does the sage see any service to render to a world which does not exist!⁹¹

We will not attempt to get into the details of Atmananda's teachings here—his ideas are similar to Iyer's, and will be thoroughly analyzed in later chapters. It suffices here to say that he takes the position of monistic idealism or mentalism, reducing everything to an entirely homogenous, sole Reality—Mind. The body, the senses and their objects, mental life, are nothing but ideas, which are in their turn, reducible to pure Consciousness itself, the only Reality. The "direct road" of *jnana*, Knowledge, leads to the realization of this truth. The "cosmological path," that of religion and yoga, also leads to Reality, but by a more indirect and lengthy road, for it considers the world, the soul, and a personal God as real.

Brunton notes that Krishna Menon approved of the majority of Ramana's teachings.

In addition to a mentalist teaching which confirmed and overlapped Iyer's, Krishna Menon gave Paul Brunton a number of practical techniques for the spiritual life. For example, in order to become detached from external objects, he suggested undertaking a pointed analysis of the provisional happiness which results from satisfied desire: this happiness is nothing other than the dissipation of the mental agitation engendered by our desire for the object, and a return to our natural state:

The happiness which *seemed* to come from the object, *in reality* came from the Self. I am myself pure Peace and Bliss.

When this truth is deeply assimilated, a permanent weakening of our desire nature follows, and our ego ceases to be prey to compulsions or *samskaras*.⁹² How to be in the world but not of it? Krishna Menon advises us to adopt the Witness point of view as often as possible—i.e. to disidentify with the role that one plays in life. However:

⁹¹ Notes by Brunton, Brunton Archive.[quote not checked].

⁹² *samskaras* = unconscious tendencies inherited from past lives; mental configurations that influence our thoughts and behavior.

This witness position cannot be taken in the midst of work or activity, because work would suffer from it.⁹³

Adopting the neutral, impersonal point of view of the Witness also helps us transcend time. In fact, memory of the past, knowledge of the present, and projection into the future require the existence of a consciousness which is in itself outside time. This cognitive principle in us contains simultaneously the three times: by training one's mind to return to the Witness position as often as possible—in the gap between two thoughts—one can transcend time, or at least reduce its grip on us.

Another practice suggested by Menon, which was also given by Iyer to the Maharaja of Mysore, consists of attempting to reduce external objects to thoughts. The first effect of this practice is a lessening of the impact of events on our mind. In the next stage, we train ourselves to ask where these ideas dwell. The answer we arrive at is: in me, the Self, the *atman*! Thoughts come and go; what remains after they vanish is the *atman* which contains them. *It alone is Real.*

Let us now examine Brunton's criticisms of Krishna Menon's teachings—criticisms which could also be applied to Iyer's. First of all, Atmananda rejects the practice of formal meditation, and Brunton categorically disagrees with him on this point. Drawing from his own personal experience and Indian tradition, including the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and the Buddha himself, Brunton declares that meditation remains necessary as long as Enlightenment has not been attained, and cannot be abandoned except temporarily. Brunton also disagrees with the opinion of Menon and Iyer that the highest state attainable by yoga is no better than deep sleep, and that the work of the intellect can by itself lead to Realization:

It is only when a disciple is dissatisfied with the intellectual stage of *jnana*, as previously he was with the stage of meditation, that he is truly ripe for philosophy.⁹⁴

Brunton's second criticism of Atmananda was for his hyper-intellectuality and his lack of spontaneity. The fact that Atmananda arranged his lecture tours and programs well in advance offended him: "It smells too much of professional spirituality: did Jesus, Buddha or Maharshi schedule their lectures six months in advance?"⁹⁵

As Brunton saw it, Krishna Menon talked too much about Truth, piling thought upon thought, whereas "a glance, a touch or a mental image do more than lectures for those

⁹³ Notes by Brunton, Brunton Archive.[quote not verified]

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

who are ripe and ready.”⁹⁶

2.3 Major Encounters: Ramana Maharshi

The first of the three figures who played a major role in shaping Brunton’s Indian experience was none other than the Sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharshi. As he has become well known in the West, we will not linger to repaint his portrait. What concerns us here are the circumstances of Brunton’s meeting with Ramana, the nature of their relationship, and the Maharshi’s influence on Brunton.

Although it is well known that Paul Brunton introduced the Maharshi to the West through *A Search in Secret India*, it is not so well known that he also revealed the existence of the Sage to the Indians themselves:

... it is amusing to me to remember that when I first made tentative enquiries about the Maharishee in the city of Madras several years ago, no one had ever heard of his existence, and I could discover nothing at all about him prior to making my visit. Today one may ask almost anyone in the same city about the Mystic of Arunachala and a great deal of information will quickly be forthcoming. It was left for me, an infidel foreigner, to make the Maharishee famous in his own country.⁹⁷

As for the circumstances of their meeting, they seemed arranged by destiny from the beginning. Arriving in Madras, Brunton encountered on the street a disciple of Ramana who obstinately followed him and insisted on taking him to his master. Brunton, who had already made plans to leave for North India, refused the offer, only to hear it repeated even more emphatically several days later by Sri Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram. The events that followed have already been related here.

As a result of his rupture with Maharshi's ashram in 1939, Brunton was never again to see the Sage. He passed near the ashram many times, musing with some bitterness over the obstacles that separated them—obstacles perhaps due to his own karma, he would say one day. But he confessed that the close spiritual tie which united him to Ramana was never severed, and he remained in telepathic communication with him until the Sage's death in 1950. Brunton received Ramana's blessing by telegram on the eve of his departure from India after the Second World War; and every year, on New Year's Day, Brunton wrote or sent a message to the Sage. In 1952, more than two years after Ramana's death, Brunton again visited the ashram at Tiruvannamalai, and discovered within 24 hours that he and the ashram leaders had nothing to say to each other.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *The Quest of the Overself*, ch. “A writer on his Writings”

Nonetheless, Brunton's privileged relationship with the Maharshi seemed to continue unbroken:

Death had not ended our relationship or barred our communications. He still existed in my mind, life, as a veritable force, an entity bereft of the flesh but clearly present. And then one evening which I shall never forget, about a year and a quarter after his physical passing, he said that we needed to part and that he would vanish from my field of awareness. He did. I never saw him again.⁹⁸

At first, Brunton believed that this disappearance of the Maharshi's mental image had occurred for the sake of his own development. A short time before his own death, he spoke about it once more. As the editor of the *Notebooks* writes:

In 1981, P.B. said more about this "next step." He said that while the inner contact had never in fact been broken, he had lacked the ability to recognize this at the time. He had to stop looking for the contact through any sort of imagery, and learn to recognize its presence as pure essence rather than [a] personalized image.

If the reverence and love that Brunton felt for Ramana are undeniable, he nevertheless retained during the second part of his life a certain ambivalence towards the mystic of Arunachala: was Ramana Maharshi, undoubtedly a great mystic and a great saint, also a master and a sage? In an article written for *The Mountain Path* forty years after their first meeting, Brunton calls him "a pure channel for a Higher Power." The Maharshi, who behaved during the day like a completely normal human being, in his moments of meditation would become the receptacle for an impersonal Presence, purely spiritual and radiant. But why then was Ramana content to remain a passive spectator to injustices committed under his own nose? Why this indifference to human suffering, particularly during the war? Brunton noted with a certain disappointment the absence in the Maharshi of an ideal of active service. This ideal, which he already held in himself in a latent way, would be stimulated and confirmed following two crucial encounters in Mysore, during the years when the world was passing through the tragic ordeal of the war. Brunton ended up regarding the mystic of Arunachala as a perfect yogi, but not quite a sage. His ideal of the sage had come to more closely resemble that of the bodhisattva, who sacrifices his own well-being in order to help others, taking on a part of their suffering:

For the sage the suffering of others is his; for the yogi it is not. The Maharshi was an adept in mysticism—that is, yoga—but his idea of truth needs to be disputed. He says that the sage can watch with indifference the slaughter of millions of people in battle. That is quite true of the yogi but it will never be true of those who have sacrificed *every future nirvanic beatitude* to return to earth until all are saved; they alone are entitled to the term sage; nor can they do otherwise, for they have found the unity of all human beings. They would never have

⁹⁸ *Notebooks*, VIII, 6, 183.

returned if they did not *feel* for others.⁹⁹

The full complexity of Brunton's attitude towards Ramana Maharshi is perhaps best summed up in this remark:

My deference to the dead master's status and reverence for his worth are great and unshakable. His pure life was an inspiration and an influence but it was not an example to imitate in all matters.¹⁰⁰

What was Ramana's influence on Brunton? We have already mentioned that Ramana had confirmed, more than introduced to Brunton, the possibility that one could attain a superior state of consciousness and firmly ground himself in his own inner being—his only true Self. In the presence of Ramana Maharshi, Paul Brunton "met himself"—he attained this inner, higher Self, distinct from his personality; he took possession of an intimate spiritual inheritance, for which he had been prepared by the more illusive experiences of his youth.

We could perhaps say that in the Maharshi, Brunton found the truth of the Self; in Subrahmanya Iyer, he discovered the truth about the world; and in the Maharaja of Mysore, he perhaps saw the truth of an integrated, fully developed human life. Of course, in reality, events unfolded in a much more complex manner. Still, these individuals were the measure of what was possible on the paths of Brunton's unfolding quest. They corresponded to three existential questions: Who am I? What is the world? How should I live? Concerning the first, the predominant influence was the Maharshi's. He gave Brunton a method called *atma-vicara*, "inquiry into the Self." Brunton summarized it in this way:

Pursue the enquiry "Who am I?" relentlessly. Analyze your entire personality. Try to find out where the I-Thought begins. Go on with your meditations. Keep turning your attention within. One day the wheel of thought will slow down and an intuition will mysteriously arise. Follow that intuition, let your thinking stop, and it will eventually lead you to the goal.¹⁰¹

One could say without exaggeration that *The Secret Path*, a large part of *The Quest of the Overself*, and certain passages of *A Hermit in the Himalayas* and *The Inner Reality* were born of this message.

⁹⁹ *Notebooks*, X, 2, 470.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, X, 2, 461.

¹⁰¹ *A Search in Secret India*, ch. 16, p. 293.

Chapter 3: IN MYSORE

3.1 The Maharaja: A Philosopher King

The fabulous presence of Prince Krishnaraja Wadiyar, the Maharaja of Mysore, hovered over the most fruitful period in Paul Brunton's life (1935-1940). The Maharaja, who loved the company of savants and writers, invited him to Mysore. Brunton accepted, attracted by the sovereign's exceptional reputation. Admitted among the regular visitors to the court, he attended palace celebrations, was granted private audiences, and followed Krishnaraja to his mountain retreat in Kemmangandi. In time, Brunton understood the secret of the Maharaja's noble character, his devotion to culture, and his unceasing efforts to improve the condition of his people:

I discovered that the secret source of all his greatness lay in the philosophy with which he had identified himself.¹⁰²

As a prefatory quote to Chapter 2 of *The Hidden Teaching*, Brunton cites a telegram sent by the Maharaja to the Indian delegates to the 1937 Congress of Philosophy in Paris:

Trust you will place before the Congress the goal of the truth of Indian Philosophy, the attainment of happiness of all beings, as enshrined in the great Sanskrit sayings: 'Sarve Janah Sukhino Bhavantu' (May all humanity be happy) and 'Sarve Satwa Sukho Hitah' (which brings about the welfare of all that exists.)¹⁰³

Brunton adds that these two verses were chanted every day in the Palace of Mysore. That all humanity should be treated as one family was not just an empty phrase for the Maharaja. Mysore was frequently called a model state, and was considered the most progressive of all the Indian states.

Historian James Manor remarks that "the approval of the British was crucial to the survival of Mysore's princely authority."¹⁰⁴ The ruling Wadiyar family derived its legitimacy to a certain extent from British power. Thus a British observer at the end of the nineteenth century, following closely the affairs of the state of Mysore, could describe it as "the best run native state in India."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Brunton notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁰³ *Hidden Teaching*, ch. 2 epigraph, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ Manor, James, *Political Change in an Indian State: Mysore 1917-1955*. South Asia Books, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ After 1900, the government of Mysore initiated a series of prestigious programs for industrial, urban, and educational development. Hydroelectric stations, iron and steel mills, textile and chemical factories, coffee plantations and roasting facilities, etc. were begun or developed. Manor wrote: "Bangalore was illumined by electric lights before Bombay, Calcutta and Madras;" the cities of Bangalore and Mysore

This progressive image, carefully cultivated by the Maharaja and his government (and co-existing, according to Manor, with a discreet maintenance of autocracy), won for the state the admiration of both the British and the Indian nationalists:

Congress leaders were frequent visitors to the state and Gandhi vacationed in Mysore as a state guest in 1927, 1934, and 1936. On the last visit, he remarked that Mysore most nearly approximated the utopia of "Rama Rajya."¹⁰⁶

Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, convalesced in a climatic station near Bangalore in May 1941. But in addition to nationalists and revolutionaries, Mysore attracted princes from all over India:

The high reputation of the administrative tradition of Mysore made this state a training ground for young princes. The Political Department sent them to us regularly. Travancore, Gwalior and Nagode were among the States whose beneficent princes came to Mysore for administrative training.¹⁰⁷

Brunton was thus able, while at the Court of Mysore, to meet many eminent individuals, both Indian and British, from political, administrative, religious, and intellectual circles, not only from Mysore but also from the whole of the waning British Raj.

The British author had found a double patron in the Maharaja, this philosopher-king to whom he expressed his gratitude in the dedication of *The Quest of the Overself*:

He who puts a roof over my head shelters my body from the elements, yet does nothing for my soul. Your highness, however, has done both. For it was through your indirect instrumentality that I was initiated into the study of the higher intellectual wisdom of India.

Here Brunton alludes to the sovereign's personal guru, Subrahmanya Iyer, who became his master after Ramana Maharshi.

The meeting of these two great minds—the progressive Maharaja and the English writer with a passion for Indian wisdom—was certainly a tremendous event, not only for Brunton's personal evolution, but also for the greater narrative of India's encounter with the West.

would become, thanks to an ambitious urbanization, "among the most elegant in Southern India." In 1916, Mysore became the first native state to have its own university. Thus "an endless line of awestruck visitors described Mysore as a garden paradise beneficently governed." – Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ Sir Mirza Ismail, *My Public Life*, London, 1954, p. 35.

In the philosopher-king, Brunton not only met a benefactor who so generously gave him residence, servants, various material resources, and even the company of his *Rajaguru*; he also met the supreme embodiment of his ideal of the sage as philosophic man of action. Later Brunton would contrast this ideal to what he considered a lesser type: the reclusive, solitary mystic. The Maharaja, open to science and modern technology, had founded the great iron and steel industry of Bhadravati, one of the most important in the British Empire. His strong example was both a source of inspiration for the English author and a reassuring confirmation of the latter's belief that philosophy and the active life are not incompatible. The Maharaja's life, which unfolded before Brunton's eyes during those years, was proof of the point:

You have rescued philosophy from those who would make it a mere refuge from disappointment, and converted it into a dynamic inspiration to higher action for service,

wrote Brunton in his dedication to *The Quest of the Overself*.

The Maharaja wished to contribute to the meeting of East and West by receiving Western thinkers and by supporting the travels of Ramakrishna monks to acquaint Westerners with Vedanta. He found in Brunton one of the architects for the bridge he wished to build with the West. In *The Hidden Teaching*, Brunton revealed the great personal interest the Maharaja showed for his work; several years before the Maharaja's death, Krishnaraja had said to him:

You have studied and carried yoga to the Western people; now study and carry *the best* that India has to give—our higher philosophy!¹⁰⁸

Thus the writer found an inspiring model, and the ruler found an esteemed and gifted interpreter who would transmit the Indian philosophic vision to Europe. Their meeting, while "decisive" only for Brunton, was fruitful for both.

On August 3, 1940, the Maharaja prematurely left his earthly body¹⁰⁹ at the age of fifty six. Brunton attended his cremation. All his life he would hold the sovereign in the highest esteem. Later he would write:

He was a *knower*, established in the higher philosophy of truth.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Brunton notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁰⁹ He died of a heart attack on July 21, a few days after participating in a horse race at Bangalore's race track. He was succeeded by his nephew, Jayachamaraja Wadiyar, "as aristocratic as his uncle" according to Manor. In August 1942, the leaders of Mysore's Congress were arrested. There followed three or four years of uncertainty and confusion. Finally, on October 12, 1947, Jayachamaraja Wadiyar "renounced in writing the prerogatives of the princely house of Mysore."

¹¹⁰ *Notebooks*, X, 2, 545.

Who was this philosopher-king, who was seen by Brunton as living the ideal expressed in Plato's *Republic*, who had been compared to the Emperor Ashoka by the English statesman Lord Samuel, and who was called *Rajarishi* by Gandhi?

Sri Krishnaraja Wadiyar Bahadur IV, Maharaja of Mysore, born in 1884, was invested with full power by the Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1902, and would reign over the principality of Mysore for almost four decades. Endowed with a personality of exceptional caliber and qualities, he distinguished himself by the eclecticism of his tastes, combining a passion for horses, military exercises, hunting, and sports in general, with a great musical sensitivity, vast culture, and an inexhaustible intellectual curiosity. In spite of the magnificent celebrations given for the sake of his people (for example, the dazzling Festival of Dasara, with its grandiose illuminations of the Palace of Mysore and its majestic procession of elephants), Krishnaraja lived a simple and austere life. Raised in the Hindu tradition, he was both devout and remarkably tolerant towards other faiths.¹¹¹

Sir Mirza Ismail, a childhood friend of the Maharaja's who became his Private Secretary and later his *Dewan* (Prime Minister), a Moslem, wrote in his autobiography:

Being himself a pious Hindu practicing his religion each day, His Highness took authentic pleasure in helping others in the practice of their own faith. I had the privilege to be intimately associated with him for almost half a century. During this entire period, he never treated me differently or showed less trust because I was an adept of another faith. And many Catholic religious from the Convent of Mysore worked at the palace as instructors, governesses or companions to the women of the princely family.¹¹²

Krishnaraja would journey to meet Ramana Maharshi, as he had made pilgrimages on foot to Badrinath¹¹³ in the Himalayas, in modern physics. He applied science to industrial development in his own state, traveled to Britain in 1936, and in 1938 invited Jeans and Eddington as well as Jung to Mysore. He especially loved Indian philosophy, and knew the *Bhagavad-Gita* by heart and to Lake Manasarovar in Tibet.

To a knowledge of Western classical literature he added a passionate interest for modern science, and he kept abreast of discoveries. He had a predilection for the *Mandukya Upanishad* with Gaudapada's *Karika*, and especially for the *Astavakra*

¹¹¹ In his speech at the opening of the Twenty first World Conference of the Association of Young Christian Students (January 2, 1937 in Mysore), he declared: "Unity in diversity is exactly the ideal which I have so often advocated to the inhabitants of Mysore, men of all castes and all beliefs." (Ismail, op. cit., p. 47)

¹¹² Ibid., p. 61.

¹¹³ One of the three sacred places at the source of the Ganges (the other two are Kedarnath and Gangotri).

Gita.¹¹⁴

He founded the University of Mysore and held philosophic discussions with pandits at the Palace.¹¹⁵ It was with his encouragement in the 1930s that a Circle of Vedantic Studies was formed in Mysore under the aegis of the Ramakrishna Ashram. There the monks took courses in Vedanta, taught from a scientific perspective by Subrahmanya Iyer, as well as other subjects such as sociology, psychology, etc. Paul Brunton frequented this circle and struck up a friendship with Swami Siddheshwarananda. In 1934, the Maharaja encouraged the monks to travel at his expense to Europe and the United States, where they would present Vedanta from Iyer's standpoint.¹¹⁶

Pandit Iyer, in "An Inquiry into Truth or Tattva Vicara," an article devoted to the sovereign, recounted various anecdotes highlighting the courage, goodness, and fairness of the Maharaja, as well as his sensitivity towards those in distress. He concluded:

He was a true renunciant at heart though an active ruler in the world outside.¹¹⁷

His words were echoed by Ismail:

Purity of soul, kindness of heart, generosity of disposition, patience and tolerance, a wise judgment of men and affairs—these are qualities which His Highness possessed to an imminent degree. It was given to him that which is given to few men—to go through life making only friends, to the exclusion of all enemies. I am sure that history will hold him among the greatest in the history of India.¹¹⁸

And in Manor's opinion:

[The Maharaja] was ... a gentle person, a reflective man of great sensitivity who lived a reclusive life within his palace. He maintained a constant interest in matters of high policy,

¹¹⁴ This was Ramakrishna's favorite work. The Maharaja published a version in Kanada script with English translation in 1932, then a second version supervised by Iyer in 1936. The sovereign so loved this text that he had passages in Sanskrit read to his mother.

¹¹⁵ Philosophic discussions were also held in the verdant surroundings of his mountain retreat at Kemmangandi, in the Baba Budan Hills. One of them was reported in the book *Tattva Vicara*, in a report entitled "In the Mahasannidhana of H.H. the Maharaja of Mysore," dated July 31, 1924; among the principal participants of this scholastic "joust" was Subrahmanya Iyer.

¹¹⁶ Swami Siddheshwarananda left for Europe in 1937 to establish the Vedanta Center of Gretz, near Paris. He traveled on the same ship with Brunton and Iyer.

¹¹⁷ *An Inquiry into Truth or Tattva Vicara*: a collection of speeches and writings by Sri V. Subrahmanya Iyer, edited by T.M.P. Mahadevan, privately printed, 1980. [ok]

¹¹⁸ Ismail, op. cit., p. 61.

but he always preferred to entrust his Dewans with the day to day management of his government. Krishnaraja Wadiyar combined warmth and good humor with a rather prim sense of propriety. He was offended by the involvement of his Dewans and administration in these factional squabbles, not only because it threatened to erode his authority in real terms, but also because its unseemliness disrupted the appearance of order and tranquillity in the affairs of state. The Maharaja cared a very great deal about the aesthetics of governance, for its own sake.¹¹⁹

During his wanderings, Paul Brunton would have many occasions to meet well-known figures—maharajas, ministers, religious leaders. However, among all these noble individuals, he would give homage to two in particular, for their sagacity and perceptiveness. In the epilogue to *The Wisdom of the Overself* he wrote:

It is specifically our twentieth-century problem to learn how to combine rapt contemplation with energetic activity, sharp reason with subtle intuition, altruistic service of the common welfare with personal self-interest, the following of Christ with the demands of Caesar in a way that men of earlier times never had to trouble their heads about. This was clearly seen by two great Orientals, the late Maharaja of Mysore and the present (1942) Maharaja of Pithapuram, who had absorbed the best ancient wisdom of their own hemisphere and yet respected the best modern achievements of the Occident. They repeatedly affirmed it during our private discussions and helped us to see it clearly too.¹²⁰

3.2 Subrahmanya Iyer: A Neo-Vedantin

At the side of the philosopher king stood another exceptional individual, the third figure who would help shape Paul Brunton's Indian experience in a major way. He was the personal guru of the Maharaja. Brunton, without naming him, describes his first meeting with the *Rajaguru* in *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*. Sri Subrahmanya Iyer paid him a visit at the Maharaja's bungalow in the Nilgiri mountains; Iyer had read some of Brunton's works and wished to meet him. The meeting would be momentous for Brunton:

Presently the writer appeared—a white-turbaned, bespectacled old Brahmin gentleman of placid countenance and short stature, with three small books tucked under his arm.¹²¹

Under Iyer's direction, Brunton would study the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Mandukya Upanishad* with Gaudapada's *Karika*, and the *Astavakra Samhita*; these studies would particularly influence his world view.

¹¹⁹ Manor, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

¹²⁰ *The Wisdom of the Overself*, p. 270.

¹²¹ *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, p. 35.

Born in Salem in 1869, into a family of Brahmins from the South, V. Subrahmanya Iyer was initially attracted to the exact sciences. After general studies at Madras Christian College, he specialized in mathematics and in physics at Bangalore Central College. He then left South India to teach sciences at the University of Agra. In 1895 he returned to the state of Mysore, where he held different teaching posts. He then became a disciple of Swami Satchidananda Sivabhinava Narasimha Bharati, the Jagadguru of the Monastery of Sringeri (founded by the first Shankara), who initiated him into the purer Vedanta of the Shankarian tradition. In 1919 he was the Registrar of the University of Mysore, and a year later became Master of Philosophy (*Rajaguru*) to the Maharaja of Mysore, a post he held for the next twenty years, until the sovereign's death. Iyer was a brilliant intellectual (he would have S. Radhakrishnan as a personal pupil). In the 1930s, through Mysore's Circle of Vedantic Studies, Iyer trained an entire generation of *sanyasis*. Paul Brunton was allowed to attend these courses, which he did with passionate attention, taking copious notes.

Iyer was not a traditional pandit—he moreover elicited much criticism by his unconventional approach to Vedanta. He was a man of incisive spirit, remarkably open, who did not hesitate to question certain typical Indian attitudes: i.e. unconditional faith in revelation and tradition (*sruti* and *smṛti*), servility vis-à-vis the scholarly authorities, and the lack of originality in their approach to the texts. He kept abreast of developments in Western thought. In 1936 he accompanied the Maharaja to England, and the following year went to Paris as the sole Indian delegate to the ninth International Congress of Philosophy, organized at the Sorbonne by the University of Paris for the Tricentenary of Descartes. He then visited various European countries, gave lectures in Austria, and met with many celebrated philosophers and scientists of the time, notably Bergson. That summer both Iyer and Paul Brunton were invited by Jung¹²² to Kusnacht, where the three discussed issues in Indian philosophy. In 1938 the Indian government invited Jung to the 25th anniversary of the University of Calcutta. On this occasion Jung met with Iyer and had lengthy, in-depth discussions with him.¹²³

¹²² Jung also corresponded with Iyer. In a letter dated January 9, 1939, Jung wrote, “I know that Indian thinking is characterized by ascribing to consciousness a metaphysical and pre-human existence. We, however, are of the opinion that what we call the unconscious—that is by definition a psyche which none is aware of—has a pre-human and pre-conscious existence. What we call the unconscious thus corresponds exactly to the Indian term of the highest of Super-Consciousness. As far as is known to me there is no proof whatever of the hypothesis that a pre-human and pre-conscious psyche is conscious—and consequently consciousness—to anyone.” (– Jung, *Letters*) As for Iyer's mentalism, Jung admits that all of our experience is mental, but instead of arriving at the same conclusion that the nature of manifestation is mental, he remained prudently skeptical, metaphysically agnostic: “But what these contents, material or mental, are in themselves *we do not and cannot know*, for we experience them as psychic contents only and as nothing else ... I have nothing to say against such a hypothesis but Western thinking has renounced, even though only recently, metaphysical assertions which by definition cannot be verified. In the Middle Ages up to the 19th century we did believe in the possibility of metaphysical statements. India, it seems to me, is still convinced of the possibility of metaphysical statements. Maybe India is right, maybe not.”(emphasis added) – Jung, *Letters*.

¹²³ “I had searching talks with S. Subramanya Iyer, the guru of the Maharaja of Mysore, whose guest I was
58 Paul Brunton

What were Subrahmanya Iyer's ideas? Let us first note his affinity with the Neo-Vedanta movement. On several points, Iyer stood close to Vivekananda; thus, Iyer's presentation at the 1937 Paris Conference resembled Vivekananda's in Chicago in 1893. In both cases, the promotion of Neo-Vedanta was financed by Mysore's royal family. Iyer's wish to win over the Western elite to Vedanta represented, in effect, a typically Neo-Hindu attitude, one alien to conservative Brahmanic tradition. In addition to their missionary spirit, Iyer and the Neo-Vedantins were alike in other ways.

3.2.1 Renewing Hindu Tradition

Iyer felt an ongoing challenge to show that Vedanta and modern science were entirely compatible.¹²⁴ This caused friction with more conventional pandits. Iyer refused requests to give lectures on the *Mandukya Upanishad* to the professors at the University of Mysore, because they had not studied contemporary science:

The *Mandukya Upanishad* is proved correct by present-day scientific knowledge; ... They will merely assume that I am offering one more interpretation of this book.¹²⁵

Iyer claimed that he was not just presenting a new interpretation of the *Mandukya Upanishad*:

I am offering no new interpretation of Vedanta, invented by me as critics say, but I am really giving out the genuine ancient truth.¹²⁶

His opinion of other celebrated Vedantins such as Y. Subba Rao¹²⁷ The letter also

for some time..." – Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, p. 275.

¹²⁴For him, the mentalistic interpretation of Vedanta agreed with the view of modern physics, for example in postulating the lack of an objective reality of time and space, the phenomenal world seen as *by* and *for* a mind, etc. This will be developed in Part II, Ch. 4.

¹²⁵Brunton, notes in Brunton Archive.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Iyer knew Y. Subba Rao quite well. Author of *The Method of the Vedanta*, cited later on in the present work, Subba Rao later became Swami Satchidanandendra Saraswati. A letter written to me by one of the Swami's disciples, pandit D.B. Gangolli of Bangalore, states:

"Subrahmanya Iyer was isolated from the contemporary pandits and thinkers, because he, just like Y. Subba Rao ... followed Shankara's original Bhashyas (commentaries) and had found out many discrepancies in the so-called traditional method of teaching adopted by Shri Virupaksha Shastri, who was [their] guru.... It is true that both Iyer and Subba Rao were initiated into Advaita Vedanta by H.H. Jagadguru Shivabhinava Narasimha Bharati. Of course, Mr. Iyer knew Subba Rao; in fact, Iyer, being senior and quite highly educated, guided Subba Rao in his earlier youth and taught him just like Mr. K.A. Krishnaswami Iyer..."

Our informer adds: "Y. Subba Rao came in contact with S. Iyer around 1899-1900, as also a little later

mentions that Brunton met Krishnaswami Iyer in Bangalore in 1946. Their brief meeting, on the latter's deathbed, was arranged by Iyer. and Atreya illustrates the same point:

Those Advaitins like Y. Subba Rao Sarma and B.L. Atreya who ignore science and want only *avasthatraya* [the doctrine of the three states of consciousness] are children. They will tell you that it is so because it is in *Mandukya*, but they are unable to *prove* it scientifically.¹²⁸

Subrahmanya Iyer was as much an Anglophile as the founder of the Brahmo-Samaj:

Rammohan Roy greeted the British as instruments of Divine Providence and considered their rule over India and the introduction of a European educational system into India to be both necessary and good.¹²⁹

Like Vivekananda, Iyer disapproved of the traditional Hindu attitude towards foreigners. He considered it both obsolete and inappropriate to the historical situation at that time, which obliged the Indians to cooperate closely with the British:

It is an essential element of [Vivekananda's] message ... that India must fully accede to the contact and intercourse with other nations and religions in order to fulfill its own religious and national potential ...¹³⁰

The ideal of service to humanity, of social action, was as we have suggested earlier, inspired by the work of the Christian missions in India. Subrahmanya Iyer's position clearly follows in the wake of Vivekananda's. For the Christian ideal of brotherhood—we are all children of the same God the Father—Iyer substituted a sense of interdependence which followed from the Advaitan metaphysical position—we are all connected because we are all ultimately *one* with the Absolute. From this Upanishadic identity of *atman* and *brahman*, Iyer derived principles of ethics, politics, and social involvement unknown to traditional Vedanta, and one could question any assertion that these principles legitimately originate in the metaphysical vision of orthodox Advaita (cf. ch. 6 below). He infused Hindu tradition with Western values, and legitimized this through a reinterpretation of that tradition inclining towards a “practical Vedanta.”

Thus Iyer also criticized Ramana's passivity in times of crisis, both local, as during the conflict within his own ashram, and global, as during the Second World War.¹³¹

with K.A. Krishnaswami Iyer, both of whom were good friends.”

¹²⁸ All Iyer quotations taken from Brunton's Indian notes in the Brunton Archive.

¹²⁹ Halbfass, op. cit., p. 221.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 236.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 236.

If Ramana Maharshi typified the traditional Hindu ideal, Subramanya Iyer, following Vivekananda, championed the newer ideal of the active sage, embodied in the person of the Maharaja. Neither Ramana nor Ramakrishna had emphasized serving society. Paul Brunton would ultimately side with Iyer, embracing the "practical Vedanta" of the Neo-Vedantins, combining tradition with a modern Western outlook.

3.2.2 Neo-Hindu Inclusivism

Finally, Iyer went further than Vivekananda in his inclusivism. Claiming to interpret Ramakrishna's thought, he included the whole of human experience in the Vedantic method, subordinating it to the ultimate stage of Advaitic metaphysical inquiry which alone led directly to Truth. All other approaches, i.e. *sadhu sanga*, (being in the company of sages); *Isvara Cinta*, (religion); *Isvara Cinta* on a higher level, (mysticism); lower *vicara* (knowledge of the phenomenal world, i.e. science) - all these can only prepare the way to higher *vicara*, or knowledge of the noumenal world, knowledge of Truth. Subrahmanya Iyer insisted that

everything, be it Religion, Science, Politics, Economics etc. ... has a place in the world of true Knowledge. He that omits anything cannot attain ultimate Truth.¹³²

He compared the teachings of Ramakrishna to a pyramid whose base rested on religious instruction suitable for the many, while at its apex were metaphysical teachings appropriate for the few. In one sentence, Iyer gives us the key to understanding Neo-Hindu inclusivism:

Since the highest Truth comprehends everything, even atheistic movements, nothing is hostile to it or outside of it.¹³³

Brahman, the Supreme Reality, is the undifferentiated One, and all doctrines and points of view are included in a subordinate way within the ultimate doctrine, Advaita. Everything, in the final analysis, is reducible to the ultimate essence, *Brahman*. There would seem to be a logical link between a non-dualistic philosophy and a psychological attitude of inclusivism.

In this same article, Iyer traces Ramakrishna's universalism back to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and to Shankara:

Krishna is teaching no particular religion, but Religion in general, which Sri Ramakrishna actually lived. The *Gita* nowhere refers to Hindu, Vaishnava or Saiva *Matam* or *Dharma*. For

¹³² Iyer, *Sri Ramakrishna and the Modern Outlook*, Vedanta Kesari, 1932.

¹³³ Ibid.

India's greatest need was, as the entire civilized world's need is now, to lift its viewpoint from particular religions to Religion in general.¹³⁴

Shankara, according to Iyer, followed the teachings of the *Gita* concerning religious practice. Moreover, among Shankara's followers, one finds Vaishnavites, Shaivites, and Shaktas. All these practices, correctly followed, lead to the mystical experience, but only philosophy can confirm that the mystical experience is Ultimate Truth.

A striking presentation of Iyer's inclusivism can be found in an article which presents Shankara as a rationalist philosopher, in contrast to the more traditional image of him as a theologian:

[Shankara's system of Advaita] is not even a philosophical dish cooked to suit exclusively the palate of the Hindu. It is like the air and the water, the common food of all men in all countries. It is ... an attempt ... at constructing a "Science of Truth," nay, in fact, it is the only attempt yet made at such a science.¹³⁵

Thus Shankara's teaching is seen as food for all humanity, the universal teaching par excellence; not a religion, but *the* religion; not a philosophy, but *the* philosophy; not a science, but the Science of Truth; not a soteriology, but *the* path to spiritual liberation par excellence, wide and deep as the ocean which contains virtually all the water of the world and in which all particular forms ultimately dissolve.

One sees again this very particular kind of "spiritual imperialism" which is characteristic of Neo-Hindu inclusivism: serene, non-aggressive, and tolerant of the many contrasting beliefs which seem to oppose it, while reabsorbing them within its womb as so many interesting forms which are valid and even precious, but because of their limitations inadequate to express the fullness of the infinite, Supreme *Brahman*.

3.2.3 Reinterpreting Shankara

Iyer interpreted Shankara from a Neo-Vedantic point of view. He found in the great Advaitin philosopher a validation of his own ethic of social service (in fact inspired, as we have seen, by Western influence), universalism (i.e. Neo-Hindu inclusivism), as well as Indian nationalist sentiment.¹³⁶ Iyer used the example of Shankara himself, who led an intensely active life in the world rather than secluding himself in a monastery. Iyer in turn reduced the multitude of racial, national, social, religious, and other distinctions

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Iyer, "Shankara: Reason or Revelation?" in *Sanskrit Research*, reprinted in his *The Philosophy of Truth*.

¹³⁶ C.f. Iyer's "Shankara and Our Own Times," reprinted in his *The Philosophy of Truth*.

between individuals to the Shankaran notion of *Maya*, the cosmic illusion which must be transcended in order to realize the truth of *Brahman*. Consequently all social, political, and humanitarian actions which emphasize our common humanity over our differences, will lead us closer to a Realization of *Brahman*. Here we again find the key idea of Vivekananda's "practical Vedanta." Indeed, the entire Hindu tradition, including of course Vedantic orthodoxy, rested on sexual, social, national, and religious discrimination—women, the *sudra* or lower caste, outcasts, and foreigners were excluded from Vedantic teaching. Iyer would not remain silent on the issue of caste. In fact, Shankara himself had gone beyond the barriers and taboos of caste: in performing funeral rites for his mother, he broke the rules of the Brahmin caste. From this Iyer drew two conclusions:

– Social restrictions are fine for the immature, those not yet capable of independent judgment; they are useless for the more spiritually mature.¹³⁷

– Breaking caste rules is condemnable when motivated by personal advantage; it is allowable when motivated by selfless, altruistic service.¹³⁸

Finally, Iyer found in Shankara's deeds the roots of Indian nationalist sentiment: by founding monasteries at the four cardinal points of the Indian subcontinent, Shankara unified very diverse communities with a sense of common interest and purpose. (This later on developed into a fuller concept of political unity under the Mahrattas and the kings of Vijayanagar.)

Another aspect of Subrahmanya Iyer's approach to Vedanta allows us to place him in the lineage of Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, rather than that of the strict orthodoxy embodied by Gaudapada/Shankara/Suresvara. Traditional Vedanta taught three steps in the realization of the Self.¹³⁹ Although Shankara was thought of more as a theologian whose teaching was based on Revelation or *Sruti*, Iyer wished to demonstrate that Shankara's philosophy rested above all on reason and the metaphysical experience.

In "Shankara: Reason or Revelation?" which appeared in *Sanskrit Research*, Iyer

¹³⁷ This raises the delicate question of criteria: how does one decide who is spiritually mature? And who decides? Or is one to suppose that the spiritual maturity which frees an individual from the caste system would be recognized spontaneously by society?

¹³⁸ On this basis, one could logically condemn mixed marriage, for example. One feels here that Iyer is cornered between his attachment to his Brahmin roots—his wish to preserve Indian social cohesion—and his progressive Anglophile attitudes.

¹³⁹ According to the *Vedantasara*, V, 181: *Sravana* (recitation of revealed texts), *Manana* (reflection on the revealed texts), *Nididhyasana* (meditation on the *mahavakya* [Upanishadic short sentences]), these three corresponding to the three traditional criteria of truth: *Sruti* (the Upanishadic Revelation), *Yukti* (reason), *Anubhuti* (metaphysical intuition or contemplative experience).

presents two aspects of Shankara: as a theologian, he leans towards *Sruti*, but as a rationalist philosopher, he leans towards reason. Iyer appeals to the authority of his guru, the ultra-orthodox head of the Monastery of Sringeri, who had said: "Shankara founded his Advaita Vedanta either on reason independent of *sruti* or on *sruti* confirmed by reason."

Iyer also quotes Shankara's commentary on the *Mandukya Upanishad*, II, 1:

This [the unreality of duality] is borne out by the *Srutis* ... But it is possible also to show the unreality of the object world even from pure reasoning, and this second chapter is undertaken for that purpose.

Shankara himself had often said that his philosophy was based on *Sruti*, or revealed scripture. Iyer believed that this was because Shankara addressed the ordinary man, who finds security in the idea of causality and thus in the idea of God—and Revelation is indispensable to prove the latter, as Iyer fully acknowledged. He believed that those of superior intelligence, have no need of this idea of divine causality, and can therefore dispense with *Sruti* and arrive at the truth of Non-Dualism by pure reason. Finally, Iyer pointed out, Shankara, in debates with Buddhists and others who did not recognize the authority of the *Vedas*, had been obliged to prove the truth of Advaita by means of reason alone. Iyer's favorite text was the *Mandukya Upanishad*, a scripture which appealed to reason to the exclusion of Revelation. He concluded:

Shankara's system of Advaita does not need the support of any Scripture or Revelation like the *Veda*. The *Srutis* may all disappear, yet will his school stand. For it is based, not upon the varying theological fancies, which are as numerous as the sands of the sea, but upon reason, the common heritage of all mankind, irrespective of colour or creed or clime.

In an article entitled "Anubhava: the Criterion of Truth in Shankara,"¹⁴⁰ Iyer clearly indicates the places occupied, in his opinion, by the three traditional criteria (Revelation, reason, and metaphysical experience); thus he draws a clear distinction between the sphere of *Apara Vidya* (inferior knowledge, i.e. cosmological and theological), and the sphere of *Para Vidya* (ultimate knowledge, i.e. of the impersonal Absolute):

Sruti is made the final or exclusive authority in *apara Vidya* and that for supporting the tenet of the CAUSAL relation or creatorship of *Brahman*,¹⁴¹ *Nirguna Brahman* = the "Absolute

¹⁴⁰ Reprinted in Iyer, *The Philosophy of Truth*.

¹⁴¹ *Brahman* = the Absolute, the One Reality behind the phenomenal world.
Saguna Brahman = the "Absolute endowed with qualities" in philosophical terminology; = *Isvara* = "The Lord" in religious terminology; *Apara* = inferior because the Shankarians think that Ultimate Reality is beyond the personal God.
Atma = "the Self" = the spiritual reality behind the empirical individual. For Shankara = identical with *Nirguna Brahman*

beyond qualities," which can be defined only in a negative way. For the Shankarian school = the Ultimate Reality, higher than the Lord. i.e. of *Saguna* or *apara Brahman* ... The support of Scriptural Revelation is, therefore, absolutely necessary for this hypothesis of cosmology, this *Saguna* or *apara* (= inferior) *Brahman*, but not for the absolute truth of *Nirguna Brahman*. The *Sruti* itself says: "This *Atma* is NOT to be attained by a study of the *Vedas*. [Iyer is quoting the *Katha Upanishad* I, 2, 23.]

Metaphysical intuition, which is higher than discursive thought, alone can give us unwavering certitude of *Nirguna Brahman*, the Reality that lies beyond forms and what is graspable by the five senses. *Sruti* alone is powerless to reveal it, because: 1. doubts can always arise, and 2. in the absence of the metaphysical experience, *Sruti* is nothing but words, empty sounds:

The tenet of *Nirguna Brahman* is true for Shankara, not because it is taught by the *Sruti*, but because it is based on *anubhava* (intuitive experience) though it is also supported by the *Sruti* ... The Advaitin knows that a legitimate doubt may have here to arise. The Rishis may have truly spoken; but they may have been deluded themselves. How are we certain that what the Rishis cognized is the Reality or Truth? This can be proved according to the Advaita, only by *anubhava*.¹⁴²

And also:

Again, in the absence of this *anubhava*, *Nirguna Brahman* as an object of thought is mere sound without sense. To one who has not seen a penguin, for instance, the word has no meaning ... Of what use, then, is such *Sruti* to him? Similarly, common sense tells the Advaitin that the meaning of the *Sruti* and especially where there are conflicting interpretations, is made out by means of reasoning based upon the authority of *anubhava*, the supreme court.

Thus reason comes into play between *Sruti* and *anubhava*, corroborating the data of intuition with those of the revealed texts.

But reason also permits discrimination between the different possible experiences, for, in an *a priori* astonishing fashion:

Anubhava ... can reveal not two, but twenty thousand conflicting experiences. And the business of the wise is to sift the ultimate truth from out of all these ... The Advaitin rejects nothing. All human experiences are his data. He tests all by reason.¹⁴³

¹⁴² According to Halbfass, op. cit., p. 302-303, it was Debendranath Tagore (father of Rabindranath) of Brahma-Samaj who was the first to verify the contents of *Sruti* not by an appeal to authority but instead by appealing to his personal experience.

¹⁴³ Here we find all the ambiguity of Iyer's position: *anubhava* (metaphysical experience), supposedly the "court of highest appeal" by which one develops a reasoning which can discern what is true in *Sruti*, appears now in its turn susceptible to many interpretations, among which it is given to reason to choose! The circularity of the argument is evident: the supreme Authority is *anubhava*, confirmed by reason which

Thus, in Iyer's reinterpretation of Shankara, it is metaphysical intuition, confirmed by reason, then in the last resort by *Sruti*, which is the final criterion of Truth.

Let us now consider what certain specialists have to say about Shankara. In their opinion, was the intuitive experience, verified by reason, the supreme criterion of Truth for the founder of Advaita? Did he relegate *Sruti* to a secondary and subordinate position as Iyer asserts?

W. Halbfass (who entitled a chapter of his book *India and Europe* "The Concept of Experience in the Encounter Between India and the West"), considered the importance given to direct experience a key element in Neo-Hindu ideology. This is shown by the interpretation Neo-Hindu authors gave for the etymology of the word *darsana*,¹⁴⁴ indicating, in their opinion, the primacy in Indian tradition of direct, intuitive experience over discursive thought.

Radhakrishnan (who was for a time a student of Iyer's) is cited by Halbfass and P. Hacker as one of the essential voices of the Neo-Hindu ideology of experience. Radhakrishnan presented Hinduism as "the religion of experience par excellence," in contrast to "the prophetic and dogmatic religions of the West."¹⁴⁵

The revealed truth of *Sruti* was according to this view a transcription of the direct, metaphysical experiences of the Vedic *rishis*. Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi became, for Neo-Hindu thinkers, living symbols of Hinduism as a religion of experience.

Another modern Vedantic thinker cited by Halbfass¹⁴⁶ is Sri Aurobindo.¹⁴⁷ After

itself is rooted in *anubhava*! Apart from this failure in reasoning, one could wonder if Iyer does not overestimate the capacity of reason and its role in the metaphysical quest; he seems to neglect the fact that *anubhava*, operating beyond all concepts, constitutes a "leap" into the trans-rational. Iyer does not seem to see the limits of human reason, even as he underestimates the necessary role of Revelation as guide and against the pitfalls of mysticism. It would seem more legitimate to suppose that Revelation and reason must join to prepare the decisive leap into *anubhava*.

¹⁴⁴ This based on the root *drs*: "to see." *Darsana* = "view," "vision," "point of view" = orthodox Hinduism knows six *darsanas* = six systems of thought, six views of the world, six approaches of Reality.

¹⁴⁵ Halbfass, op. cit., p. 382.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 384-85.

¹⁴⁷ Aurobindo attempted to take up the Western challenge of experimentation in the physical and natural sciences, reviving the Indian tradition of "experimentation" with diverse states of consciousness, forgetting that scientific experimentation by definition is indefinitely repeatable, while religious experience is spontaneously produced and does not automatically unfold from favorable conditions, such as asceticism, prayer, etc. Advanced mystics know the "dark night of the soul," where the experience of God clearly does not occur, in spite of the contemplation and renunciation practiced by the aspirant.

examining the crucial importance of the concept of experience in Neo-Vedanta, Halbfass asks what role this concept played in Indian tradition before India's encounter with the West. In his opinion, Shankara (to whom, as we recall, Iyer would ascribe his own point of view) accepted the idea (developed by the Mimamsakas) of the non-human origin of the *Vedas* (*apauruseyatva*):

The *Veda* and the *Upanishads* ... do not record anybody's personal experiences. They are an eternal, impersonal structure of soteriologically meaningful discourse.... Acceptance of and commitment to the objective structure of Vedic revelation are central for Sankara and certainly more than a concession to historical and cultural circumstances.¹⁴⁸

Thus, Iyer's view of Shankara would seem to be a modern, Neo-Hindu interpretation,¹⁴⁹ more than a rediscovery of the original thought of Advaita's founder. Halbfass' conclusion (we quote several extracts) follows:

The role of the concept of experience in Neo-Hinduism is not a mere continuation ... of that of *anubhava* ... in traditional Hinduism. The changes are not only a matter of emphasis; they reflect a radically new situation—the encounter of the Indian tradition with Western science and philosophy; and they represent one of the most exemplary cases of reinterpretation and revision of the tradition in response to Western ideas and perspectives.¹⁵⁰

And later:

The Neo-Hindu appeal to religious or mystical experience often involves the claim that religion can and should be scientific, and that Hinduism, and Vedanta in particular, has a scientific and experimental basis. The concept of experience has thus become one of the most significant devices for presenting and interpreting the Hindu tradition to a world dominated by science and technology. Westerners, too, have been attracted by this idea. . . . Experience, with its ... broad range of connotations, seems to indicate a possible reconciliation or merger of science and religion, providing religion with a new measure of certainty and science with a new dimension of meaning.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Halbfass, op. cit., p. 388.

¹⁴⁹ But this might not apply to the non-human origin of the *Veda*. More precisely, Iyer's hypothesis is that Shankara made a simple concession to Brahmin orthodoxy, which Shankara attempted to restore against the prevailing heterodoxies of the time (especially Buddhism). While struggling against the excessive ritualism of the Mimamsakas, and in order to affirm his non-dualist message, it seems psychologically plausible that Shankara, on certain points, such as the transcendental character of the *Veda*, judged it necessary to support the Mimamsaka position in order to restore the prestige of *Sruti*. Halbfass' assertion appears questionable to us; Shankara's biography is far too unknown for one to decide whether Halbfass' hypothesis or Iyer's is correct. At this point, it remains doubtful whether Iyer rediscovered Shankara's authentic thought or if he reinterpreted it.

¹⁵⁰ Halbfass, op. cit., p. 395.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

3.2.4 Remarks

Halbfass' penetrating reflections might have been shared as well, with some reservations, by Iyer and Brunton, allowing us to place these last two within the Neo-Vedantic sphere. The primacy Iyer gives to metaphysical experience (strictly checked by reason) over Revelation is consistent with his persistent presentation of Vedanta from a scientific perspective, and with his resolutely pro-modern, pro-Western, rationalist and anti-religious attitude.

This Neo-Hindu rebalancing of the three criteria of Truth, favoring intuitive experience and reason over Revelation, could not but appeal to a Westerner wishing to present to his contemporaries the essence of Vedanta's message. Indeed it was traditional Hinduism's preeminent appeal to the authority of *Sruti*¹⁵² which made it difficult to export Vedanta as a universal teaching. Meditative experience and reason, on the other hand, are a part of our shared human inheritance, and were consequently the two pillars on which Brunton would build his teaching. His doctrine of mentalism satisfies reason, and his concept of the Overself arises from, and makes explicit, our individual spiritual experience. The success of the notion of experience for Neo-Vedantic thinkers, Brunton included, is explained by its promise of a synthesis reconciling science and religion, modernity and tradition, West and East.¹⁵³ Meslin concludes: "From this perspective, one

¹⁵² Nevertheless, the Vedantic Realization is presented in a detailed way in Brunton's work, in the form of allusions, in quotes and in three chapters devoted to commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita* in *The Inner Reality*. Moreover, the translation and diffusion in the West of the essential texts of the religious traditions of the world created a favorable context for the study of Hindu doctrines. For the modern Western reader, the intellectual understanding and possibly a personal empathy for these doctrines would take the place which the authority of *Sruti* had for the traditional Hindu.

¹⁵³ Brunton was familiar with Anglo-American literature on religious phenomena, in particular William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. A French observer, Michel Meslin (*L'Experience humaine du divin*, Paris, 1988, p.128-132), standing outside this tradition, sees things quite differently:

"In the Anglo-Saxon milieu, the scientific model of knowledge was transposed to the religious domain, providing an empirical basis for a theology of knowledge, and taking personal religious experience as the very foundation of religion. It was a veritable misuse of a generally recognized scientific criterion, that of scientific experiment, introduced into a domain where it could not function as in the scientific domain, since the object of religious experience is not an empirical object."

Meslin carefully distinguishes the concept of *Erlebnis* (unanticipated event, transforming experience) from that of *Erfahrung* (integrated, assimilated knowledge): "Now such arguments show to what extent the search for truth held in the religious experience cannot imitate the scientific model into the method, appearing analogous, of an experimental experience in the domain of the exact sciences. This assimilation is illusory and, although seemingly very technical, utterly naive. Because an experience, even religious, is first an event which man is not the master of, even if he is however always the place...."

The result of this unforeseen happening is that this experience, *Erlebnis*, is modified by what I knew, or believed I knew, in the realm where it happened.... Thus all experience brings a Renaissance and opens doors to new horizons. It cannot become knowledge capable of leading to modified behavior—i.e. of *Erfahrung*—in relation to other experiences.

would think that the truth of the religious experience is awakened in the man himself, in as much as to be believing, permitting him to have the experience of himself in having that of the Other. Man is inseparably present to himself as to the Other in the immediate experience of this relationship which unites them. Thus, it is from the experience of self in the discovery of the Divine Being that the religious experience holds its truth.”

Subrahmanya Iyer’s ideas are known to us both from Paul Brunton's personal notes and from two posthumous collections of articles privately published: *An Inquiry into Truth or Tattva-Vicara* and *The Philosophy of Truth or Tattvagnana*. The general foundation of his teaching is the Vedantic doctrine of *avasthatraya* (the three states of consciousness).¹⁵⁴

Iyer also posits a clear distinction between religion, which is in the realm of opinion (*matam*), and philosophy, which aims at knowing Reality or Truth (*tattvam*)—a surprisingly categorical distinction for an Indian. If in post-Medieval Europe there developed a firm distinction between religion and philosophy, it was not so in India, where the two remained closely linked. In contrast with his peers, one can find in Iyer a distrust of mysticism which is almost a rejection. This would later on be a source of disagreement between him and Brunton. Iyer's thought is rational and scientific, opposed to blind faith in God and tradition.

How does Iyer define Truth, the goal of pure philosophy? In three phrases: 1. It is that which is beyond all contradictions; 2. it is universal; and 3. it is as necessary as “two times two equals four.” That is the abstract definition, but how is Truth tested in life (since in India, philosophy is not separate from life)?¹⁵⁵ Truth at work in our life

“Thus it is the religious experience which is man's prelude to the mystery of God and that which expands into the infinite dimensions of the Divine Being.”

¹⁵⁴ The three states of consciousness: *jagrata* (waking state), *svapna* (dream state), and *susupti* (deep sleep). We will return to this doctrine in detail in Pt. II. According to Iyer, the doctrine of *avasthatraya* is of utmost importance, for it alone takes into account the totality of human experience; this doctrine is exclusively Indian, for European philosophy ordinarily concerns itself only with waking experience. (If Freud reopened an interest in dreams, it was from a very different perspective, and non-metaphysical; as for deep sleep, it remained largely ignored by Western philosophy.) Iyer saw in this doctrine the basis for the metaphysics of Vedanta; furthermore, in following a *sadhana* (spiritual practice), the understanding of this key doctrine required the shedding of the ego, and the adoption of a philosophic discipline leading to impartiality. Thus, in a letter to Brunton (25 March 1956; copy in Brunton Archive), Swami Siddheshwarananda, another Iyer student, remarked: “One must become so impersonal to understand the doctrine of *avasthatraya*!”

¹⁵⁵ Every doctrine implies respect for a corresponding way of life, i.e. the metaphysical is not divorced from the ethical (It was the same for certain great teachers of Antiquity: think of Socrates, Plato, Epictetus, etc.)—while in the West the erudite or philosopher can conduct his private life badly without anyone taking offense. S. Iyer, in spite of having a critical mind, was in this way very Indian. Purely theoretical metaphysics was not sufficient for him.

would be recognized as that which always leads towards realizing the good of all beings. In a lecture given in Vienna in 1937, Iyer declared:

To live for the sake of one's own good, or that of one's own kith or kin, race or country ... is not to realize Truth, which demands the effort to seek the good of *all*. Such a discipline alone makes for Truth.¹⁵⁶

3.3 The Master and the Maharaja

Let us take some time to further explore the relationship between Subrahmanya Iyer and the Maharaja of Mysore. This was a relationship of mutual esteem and reciprocal gratitude: if Iyer owed his professional career to the Maharaja, the latter owed his spiritual illumination and his intellectual and moral formation to the pandit. While traveling in North India the Maharaja had visited Agra's college, where Iyer was a professor of sciences. The Maharaja was impressed with Iyer and brought him back to Mysore. The sovereign then suggested that Iyer take *sanyasa* and join Kugli Math, a monastery of the branch of Sringeri, to eventually become its Head. Iyer refused. He had been tempted during his youth to become a *sanyasin*, but his guru had dissuaded him, and in time he had become content with the life of a householder. He represented for Brunton the ideal of an active life in the world, as opposed to the classical Indian ideal of ascetic renunciation of the world.¹⁵⁷

The Maharaja more than once offered Iyer considerable sums of money, but the latter, loyal to the ancient Indian tradition of free spiritual teaching, would not accept any fees.¹⁵⁸ The pandit would remind Brunton of their indebtedness (and that of Westerners

¹⁵⁶ Compare this with Montesquieu, quoted by Ch. Malamoud (*Cuire le Monde*, p. 137): "If I know of something that is helpful to me, and is harmful to my family, I reject it from my mind. If I know of something helpful to my family, but which does not help my country, I try to forget it. If I know of something helpful to my country but harmful to Europe, or helpful to Europe but harmful to humanity, I regard it as a crime." Montesquieu and Iyer join in condemning egoism—not only the obvious egotism, but also more subtle forms of selfishness, such as possessive and exclusive attachments to groups (family, country, etc., which are considered extensions of the ego) to the detriment of larger groupings; in the end, perhaps only the love of humanity at large could be considered to be free from egoism. (Again the Indians would probably extend this to include respect for all life, thus non-violence towards animals, vegetarianism, etc.) For Iyer, this moral universalism rests on a metaphysical framework, while for Montesquieu the framework is purely ethical. Nevertheless, even if Advaita can legitimately establish an ethic of passive non-violence (*ahimsa*), to find in it the basis for an ethic of active compassion (which is implied by Iyer)—appears much more questionable.

¹⁵⁷ One must remember that in traditional India, the doctrine of the four *asrama* or "stages of life" applied only to older men, who had already satisfied the normal obligations of family and social life. However, the *sannyasa* ideal was prestigious, as testified by the insistence of the Maharaja that his favorite pandit embrace this path.

¹⁵⁸ Iyer also refused payment for his Vedanta lectures to the Ramakrishna monks of Mysore, and once he returned to the sovereign ten thousand rupees which had been given to him via the Prime Minister. The

in general) to Mysore's royal family: Krishnaraja's father had financed Vivekananda's voyages to Europe and the United States in 1893. Forty years later, the present Maharaja, continuing the noble family tradition of patronage, was making it possible for Brunton to study Vedanta in privileged circumstances. In return, Brunton would transmit the teachings to the West.

It appears that in Iyer's view, he and the Maharaja had invested Brunton with a well-defined mission:

The late Maharaja of Mysore was so anxious to spread the philosophy of Advaita that he once said to me: "Here is P.B. He has a great gift with his pen and an aptitude for mysticism and philosophy. Let us keep him here in Mysore to study Advaita and then make it known to the West."¹⁵⁹

In turn, the sovereign was conscious of his debt to the pandit-philosopher. The Yuvaraja, a personal friend of Brunton's, confided one day to the latter:

I realize greatly how much my brother the Maharaja owes to Subrahmanya Iyer for forming his character and molding his outlook on life.¹⁶⁰

In Mysore, Brunton saw a photograph dated 1928, showing the ruler, his hands elevated and joined in the symbol of reverence. It was signed and annotated in Kanada script by the Maharaja himself with the following Upanishadic quotation:

I bow my head to my preceptor who shows me the secret truth, destroying all kinds of doubts, and who makes me perceive Oneness directly. I bow my head to such a guru who is really the Lord of all.¹⁶¹

One day, the sovereign expressed to Iyer his bewilderment in the face of all the contradictory philosophic doctrines. What should he believe?

This was the crucial moment when I judged him fit for initiation into the ultimate path—

Maharaja generously financed Iyer's 1937 trip to Europe, but at the end of his lecture tour of various countries, Iyer again disposed of a considerable sum, which he donated to the British Institute of Philosophy for the creation of a course on "Inquiry into Truth." He confided to Brunton at the time of Krishnaraja's death (August 3, 1940) that he had accepted the position of Rajaguru not for personal gain, but as an act of service. He could benefit the people of Mysore through the influence he would exert on the sovereign, bringing material help through wise measures he inspired. And he could serve the world at large through his teaching, which the monks and Brunton would carry to the West.

¹⁵⁹ Iyer, as reported in Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶⁰ Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

hitherto I had played the pundit, merely explaining the Upanishads in terms of Scholasticism, quoting authorities.... But the utterance of these doubts revealed that the time had come to give him something higher.¹⁶²

The intimate nature of the spiritual bond between the Maharaja and his Rajaguru also appears in the following anecdote from Brunton's personal notes. Iyer was away from Mysore when the Maharaja died:

[Iyer's] disciples bemoaned this fact but said that perhaps His Holiness concentrated on the mental picture of Subrahmanya Iyer before dying and this was just as good. Subrahmanya Iyer replied: "You have fallen into error. You still think the idea is one thing and the object is a second, as shown by your use of the word 'present.' When the whole world is an idea, how can you say any part of it is not 'present?' It is all present as idea in the mind—*Hence I was present in His Holiness' mind.* The notion of a separate, outside external object and an inside idea is quite incorrect."¹⁶³

Thus Iyer was not content merely to teach mentalism in his classroom. His mentalistic outlook permeated his daily life, and this was an important part of his teaching:

When His Holiness was worried by family and state troubles, I advised him: "Look upon them all as ideas—know that the whole world is an idea, and therefore within yourself. Ideas are transitory. So why worry about them? Just know they are mere ideas, and thus you can be at peace."¹⁶⁴

Iyer's unique personality and his privileged position as the sovereign's private tutor evoked some enmity. In fact, he appears to have been isolated from both Indian and Western intellectual circles of the time, the target of envy and calumnies. Brunton noted:

The Maharaja received more than twenty letters, denouncing and vilifying Iyer. He gave them to him with an amused smile, saying: "Here, this is what people think of you."¹⁶⁵

Furthermore, Iyer's scientific turn of mind disturbed the more traditional pandits. Thus the Principal of the Indian Institute of Philosophy, Mr. Malkani, agreed with Iyer that "Vedanta must be based on reason, not on revelation" but objected that he himself "[did not] see the need for a scientific method in the study of Vedanta."¹⁶⁶ Iyer refused an

¹⁶² Iyer, as reported in Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶³ Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶⁴ Iyer, as reported in Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶⁵ Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

invitation to teach at the Institute.¹⁶⁷

As for Iyer's reception in the West, Brunton's Mysore notes are revealing of European cultural attitudes:

We traveled together to the International Congress of Philosophy in 1937. Subrahmanya Iyer achieved little in the way of influencing European thinkers towards Vedanta. Later he said ruefully: "They thought I was a black man and therefore could know nothing. They looked down upon me—although very kindly—as a primitive man who could not possibly have anything to teach them."¹⁶⁸

In the desert of incomprehension which seems to have surrounded Brunton's mentor, we found nevertheless a few positive appreciations, for instance this one from C.R. Srinivasan, Assistant of Philosophy at the University of Annamalai:

Subrahmanya Iyer is the greatest Indian thinker today, a direct disciple of the late Nrsimha Bharati of Sringeri. His is the rational position of Vedanta, which includes and assimilates all the possible conclusions of science, religion and philosophy.¹⁶⁹

And Iyer's student Swami Siddheswarananda wrote:

I still hold that Subrahmanya Iyer had only one more incarnation to take, that he was a genius for intellectual understanding of the most esoteric truths. He had been initiated into the traditional esoteric doctrine of Shankara, which is not written in the books but only taught in private.¹⁷⁰

The correspondence between the Swami and Brunton portrays Iyer as brilliant and honest, morally upright, but also revealing an uncompromising and abrupt character little inclined to indulge human shortcomings:

If Mr. Subrahmanya Iyer was less violent against religion and mysticism, he would have had a very great success. Maharshi was never against something. However, but for Mr. Iyer's training, I for my part would not have been able to appreciate a living Buddha, a living Shankara like Maharshi.... On the intellectual level, keeping aside my personal admiration

¹⁶⁷ Another anecdote illustrates the differences which existed between Iyer and the other pandits and professors: Iyer had suggested including Bradley's work *Logic of the Unconscious* in the philosophy courses at the University of Mysore, and witnessed an overwhelming refusal by the professors, including Professor Hiriya, with whom Brunton had many philosophical private discussions. Iyer declared bitterly to Brunton, "So they rejected my advice and I decided to keep quiet in the future." – Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Brunton's notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

and love for Mr. Iyer, I have never seen his like. The Vedanta he has taught us cannot become a propagandist teaching. One has to become so impersonal in one's attitude to understand the *avasthatraya*! But the world is sustained and nourished by the emotional and affective reactions that can come only within the jurisdiction of a single state. It is so difficult for a Western mind to make the difference between "experience" and "realization" and I am so tired of hearing the so-called "experiences" of people! But I cannot and will not, like Mr. Iyer, decry them. People have a necessity to live on the compensatory plane; you cannot take away the crutches on which a lame man holds on to life, it would be an act of cruelty to destroy his crutches. This is my criticism against Krishnamurti and Mr. Iyer. But I remain always a very faithful *chela* of Mr. Iyer with my spiritual lineage tracing back to Ramakrishna and his disciples and Maharshi and his teachings.¹⁷¹

We might suggest here that Paul Brunton, being more of a realist and natural mystic, was able to present Iyer's teachings in a less purely intellectual form, enhancing their appeal by giving greater importance to intuition and feeling.

Another quality which Brunton said made Iyer a "living Socrates" was his modesty. He wished to be known only as a "seeker of Truth," and refused during his lifetime to publish a book or even a collection of his articles.¹⁷²

3.4 Indian Master and British Disciple

What was Subrahmanya Iyer's influence on Paul Brunton? Early on, it was very strong, which is explained in part by the circumstances of their meeting.¹⁷³ In 1936-37 as well as in the years following, Brunton had reached a stage where he felt he had mastered yoga, i.e. the practice of meditation. To begin with, he no longer felt he had much to learn about it. In addition he was put off by the denigrating campaign orchestrated against him at the Ramana ashram, and he was thus inclined to distance himself emotionally and intellectually from the world of yoga. If his first stay in India had clearly been under the influence of Ramana Maharshi, the third would be under that of Subrahmanya Iyer. (The second might be seen as a period of transition.) Iyer entered Brunton's life at a time when the latter had formulated questions for which he could not find answers:

¹⁷¹ Swami Siddheswarananda, letter to Brunton from the Ramakrishna Vedanta Center in Gretz, March 25, 1956.

¹⁷² Brunton saw two reasons for Iyer's reluctance to publish: first, Iyer's wish to protect Krishnaraja's reputation as a devoutly religious ruler (The revelation of the Maharaja's agnosticism concerning the existence of a personal God would disturb the Indian public.); second, the fear (inherent in all initiated Brahmins at that time, Brunton noted) of further upsetting the masses by openly declaring that Ultimate Truth is beyond the external forms of collective and ritualistic religious practice.

¹⁷³ Brunton actually met Iyer relatively late, in April 1937, seven years after he had met Ramana.

My plaint is that for long I was told by the Indian Advaitins, by their holy men and even by texts, that the universe does not exist or, if it does seem to, it is merely an illusion. The final declaration which really put me, as a Western inquirer, off Advaita came later; it was that God too was an illusion, quite unreal. Had they not left it at that but taken the trouble to explain how and why all this was so, I might have been convinced from the start. But no one did. I had to wait until I met Subrahmanya Iyer for the answer.¹⁷⁴

With the help of Iyer, the British author was made more aware of the negative aspects of certain yogic and mystical circles:

What I have seen in these circles convinces me that a mild insanity pervades many of them, from much reputed gurus to just beginning disciples. It was a man of the sharpest intelligence, of the most acute psychological insight, who first pointed out this fact to me. V. Subrahmanya Iyer illustrated his thesis again and again during our textual explorations and personal excursions in India itself, but it was found still valid when I continued the investigation in Europe and America.¹⁷⁵

Later Brunton would criticize Iyer's intellectualism, judging it dry and excessive. Seeking balance and harmony, Brunton wished to maintain in his own world view the mysticism disdained by the Maharaja's philosophy master:

Reject the one-sided narrowness of V.S. Iyer and John Levy, successor to Atmananda, which makes them reject mystic experience and mystic feeling. For then the intellect alone is made to serve the quest so that the result is hardly a balanced one. Fanaticism is too limited a way to trace down truth. Mysticism has its valuable service to render on its own level in feeling and devotion.¹⁷⁶

Brunton's attitude towards Iyer was nonetheless respectful, that of a student or disciple towards his master. He would address him as "My respected guru," "My dear Mr. Iyer," and "Reverend Guru."

Iyer's influence on Paul Brunton's thought was in my opinion twofold: intellectual and ethical. Iyer introduced the criterion of reason into Brunton's quest for Truth, by presenting Vedantic metaphysics from a scientific point of view: i.e. he questioned yoga as the only approach to Reality. Brunton's position in regard to mysticism (the path of yoga, of intimate, individual meditation) would be that of a sympathetic critic: mysticism is good in its proper place; it is, in fact, a preparation for metaphysical research.

Two of Brunton's most rigorously intellectual works, *Indian Philosophy and Modern*

¹⁷⁴ *Notebooks*, X, 2, 366.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, XI, 11, 47.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, XI, 1, 52.

Culture (1939), dedicated to Iyer, and *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* (1941), were from all evidence written under the influence of the Rajaguru. Brunton's letters to his master from the years 1939-40 are eloquent on this point. Here are some extracts:

May I take this opportunity to tell you how much I miss the Advaita class? The surgical operations which you have been performing on us have cut away some of the film of cataract over our eyes. We are not so blind as formerly. We are able to evaluate ideas and things more correctly.

And:

The more I study Vedanta the more I realize how I have wasted precious years in having regarded Yoga as a stop and not as a step.

In addition, this philosophic inquiry into Truth would for Iyer have ethical implications, leading one to selfless service to humanity; this clearly impressed the British author:

You have so constantly held before us the ideal of doing some service to humanity before we die, that we must be very poor material if we do not respond to your teaching, so my gratitude goes out towards you.

In fact, Iyer's teachings would serve to balance the influence of Ramana Maharshi, giving Brunton a rational, metaphysical framework which would complete the interior, intuitive experiences received through the Sage of Tiruvannamalai. After his return from Europe in 1937, Brunton had the idea to reconcile the teachings of his two spiritual mentors. Writing to Swami Siddheshwarananda from London, he declared:

I wrote and told [Iyer] that I intended in the future to reconcile both Mysticism and Vedanta.¹⁷⁷

Writing back to Brunton several years later, the Swami replied:

You have got it from Mr. Iyer and it will be so nice that the teaching of Maharshi is presented by you in such a way as to fit with the Karika metaphysics!¹⁷⁸

We will examine Brunton's fusion of mysticism and Vedanta in detail in Part II of this work. In brief, he would advocate the cultivation of a latent faculty he called *insight*, which combines the abstract reason of the metaphysician with the mystic's intuition, while transcending both.

¹⁷⁷ Letter from 1938; copy in author's possession.

¹⁷⁸ Letter dated March 25, 1956, already quoted earlier.

Regardless of their later differences, the English author was always aware of how greatly fortunate had been his long association with the Rajaguru:

Please, try to spare time for me because I am devoting 1939 to the work on the true Vedanta which is so urgently needed in the West; your cooperation will be of inestimable value.

The contact between such a master and a gifted pupil could not help but be stimulating to both; this is shown by the extracts below. Brunton declared:

Subrahmanya Iyer invigorated my mind and gave me the courage to question the interpretation which, in accordance with Indian tradition, I had hitherto put upon my mystical experiences.¹⁷⁹

In turn, the Advaitin master¹⁸⁰ said to Brunton:

You have a very great and important work before you in introducing Vedanta to the West. I want to prepare you to do this, so that my life may bear some fruit. You grasp my explanations almost instantly, whereas even Sir Radhakrishnan, whom I knew when he was here in Mysore as a Professor, could not grasp things so quickly as you. Moreover, your work in yoga and meditation has prepared you for the higher truth, and your mind is ready and concentrated.¹⁸¹

It is enlightening to discover Iyer's advice to Brunton—judicious advice which showed his knowledge of psychology and the workings of society as well as of metaphysics, advice which would generally be followed by the British author for the rest of his literary and spiritual career.

One suggestion of Iyer's which appears in Brunton's Indian notes with great frequency and insistence, is that of ideological neutrality. In reading the following, let us note that later in his life Brunton was to choose the deliberately neutral term "philosophy" to indicate the teachings expressed by the whole of his writings:

¹⁷⁹ Indian notes, Brunton Archive.

¹⁸⁰ Iyer, a pure Advaitin, had on his personal stationery a monogram illustrating the *Jnana-mudra* or *Advaita-mudra*—a hand with the index finger touching the thumb, the other three fingers extended—accompanied by this verse of the *Isa Upanishad*: "How can there be delusion or suffering when oneness is realized?" The meaning of the mudra is that one cannot know Truth if one has not mastered the analysis of the three states of consciousness, *avasthaya*. As Iyer explains it, "the bent forefinger touching the thumb means that when you separately stretch out the fingers, i.e. examine the three states, there is a seer or *drik* which knows them, symbolized by the index finger; this is *Turiya*, the fourth. The touching of the forefinger with the thumb means that this fourth state is one with the *Atman* or Self."

¹⁸¹ These quotes and those that follow are from Brunton's Indian notes, Brunton Archive.

Do *not* label yourself. If you say Hinduism, opponents will rise up and say Christianity. If you say Vedanta philosophy, they will oppose it with Western philosophy. Vivekananda's Vedanta was welcome and triumphant at the Chicago's World Fair of 1893. But at New York's World Fair in 1938, no exhibit or lecture by the Vedanta or Hindu Faith (or indeed any non-Christian and non-Judaic faith) was allowed. Thus the Ramakrishna Mission being labeled as a sect aroused suspicion and enmity. Therefore, form no cult, tie no label. Be forewarned and thus forearmed.

There was also a vigorous warning:

If you put P.B. on a pedestal, others will put XX as a reaction. If you start a Shankara day of celebration, then the Madhvites will start a Madhva day. It is therefore best to keep quiet and not start a sect, cult or movement or following.

Thirty or forty years later, Brunton in his *Notebooks* would address a similar warning to his readers. As we have noted before, throughout the course of his life he refused to found an organization or to be considered a guru.

Another piece of advice that appears frequently in the discussions between teacher and student concerns the attitude Brunton should take in regard to yoga.¹⁸² Reading the repeated emphasis on moderation and discretion, one better understands Brunton's inner itinerary.¹⁸³ He was at that time working on *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* (published 1941), and would regularly show his manuscript to Iyer for criticism and suggestions. The Rajaguru wrote:

Chapters 7 and 8 ... reveal the ability to present philosophy in an intelligible and attractive manner, in a way I have never seen in any volume. There is no doubt that you have an inner gift for understanding and teaching philosophy.

Later, in his *Notebooks*, Brunton reintegrated yoga—but this time in its broader sense, including its ethical dimension (*yama* and *niyama*) and selfless action (*karma-yoga*)—in his philosophic teaching, harmoniously combining it with metaphysics.

For the moment, Iyer, seeing Brunton turn away from yoga, gave him some personal advice: yoga would appeal to 99% of readers, while pure Vedantic philosophy would not reach more than 1%; thus he should continue writing about yoga—to earn a living as well as to help readers:

¹⁸² The term "yoga" as used in this work designates the group of meditation techniques brought into play in the three last "limbs" of Patanjali's Yoga sutras: *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (contemplation), *samadhi* (absorption) (for Eliade, = "ecstasy").

¹⁸³ In the 1940s he may have gone through a crisis of rejection of mysticism and yoga. (In 1939 the disappointment caused by Maharshi's Ashram was completely fresh in his mind.) During this period he put a higher value on metaphysical reasoning, on the rational scientific inquiry into perceptions, and into the concepts of matter, time, and space.

This is not hypocrisy; it is recognition that there are gradual stages of development of the mind and acceptance of the fact. You may teach individuals who are ripe at any time.

He suggested that Brunton allude in his writings on yoga to a higher level of Truth, thus instilling in readers a thirst for this Truth:

The Vedantic idea is to give people what suits them; to do so is no error.

All of this shows that despite his elevated and subtle metaphysical views, Iyer was also pragmatic. He would insist repeatedly, "Vedanta is practical." It was important to reach a wide readership, and for this, one could sweeten the pill of Vedantic metaphysics¹⁸⁴ with the syrup of mysticism, appealing to feelings while allowing the lofty ideas to get through. Iyer tried to convince Brunton, who at the time was thinking of starting an esoteric magazine called *The Sphinx*, to be distributed in India and the West, to include in it both philosophic and religious elements, as the great ones of the past had done in their teachings:

It will never be possible to teach Advaita to the many. It will always be only for the few metaphysically minded who are and always will be rare. Hence to preserve the written tradition, the Upanishads, the Gita and Shankara's works have all deliberately mixed up the esoteric and the exoteric between the same covers. You once disagreed with me when I advised you to devote the magazine to *both* mysticism and philosophy, otherwise hardly anyone will buy it. Now I show you that the greatest *jnanis* of the past have mixed the two together in order to keep the highest teaching in circulation in order to benefit the largest number of people.

Here once again we see the ideal of active humanitarian service given to Brunton by his master. While Iyer proceeded to derive ethical principles from Vedantic metaphysics—which could be problematic, as we will show later on—the larger social context of Brunton's quest also exerted its influence. The Second World War confined him in India until its end. There, echoes of the war's horrors and of the Nazi occupation of Europe reached Iyer and Brunton at their tranquil retreat in Mysore. They could not remain indifferent. The indirect experience of this terrible period impressed Brunton deeply, and motivated him with a sense of urgency to serve suffering humanity in his own way, by making a liberating knowledge available as widely as possible. The last book he would publish during his lifetime, *The Spiritual Crisis of Man*, written in the post-war years, is the work of someone who had survived a cataclysm to exhort his surviving contemporaries to heed the lessons of the tragedy and change their ways.

Iyer had already encouraged Brunton in this direction. He had written to him, probably in 1939:

¹⁸⁴ Brunton heeded this advice (see Ch. 4 below for a discussion of his concept of the Overself).

I am very anxious that you should write and publish something to soften the hearts of men in Europe. It is most painful to see how women, children and men are undergoing inhuman suffering. This is not the time for thoughtful people to enter caves and hide themselves on mountains to seek their own peace or commune with the Reality confining this bliss to their individual self.

These remarks bring us to Iyer's ethical and political views, filling out the portrait of one whose influence on Brunton would be almost all-encompassing. Here again, we find that the Rajaguru, far from being a gentle dreamer removed from the world's realities, at times displayed remarkable insight and a rare impartiality during a period when nationalist passions were rife in India.

What then were the ethical principles championed by Iyer? They arose directly from the essential Vedantic axioms found in the *mahavakya: Tat tvam asi* (You are That) and *Aham brahmasmi* (I am Brahman):

Vedanta's fundamental principle is that because there is no such thing as the "I," you cannot live for yourself, whether "you" are an individual, a family, a community, a nation or a race. It is not truth and therefore such separation will go, even though it will take a long time.

Thus the great lesson of Vedanta is the necessity of renouncing individual, familial, national and racial egoism—knowing that egoism is born of an illusion, an erroneous belief in the reality of a separate "me": those who realize that *Brahman* is everywhere are no longer separate from others. But a global unity of the human race would have to arrive slowly, through education and the ripening of individuals, rather than by forced conversion: "Everything which is achieved through violence, sooner or later fails." He added:

Vedanta wants to trace out the interwoven and united character of all life. Hitler's mining of the British seas raised the cost of British medicines threefold to the poor peasant in Mysore. Thus all the world is inter-related and inter-connected. We cannot really separate ourselves from others. Science has now perceived this.¹⁸⁵

One can thus understand Iyer's opposition to using Kanada, Mysore's local language,¹⁸⁶ as the official medium for teaching at its University. No modern scientific literature had been published in Kanada. Iyer vigorously favored using English¹⁸⁷ throughout India, over local languages or even Hindi. He saw in English the possibility

¹⁸⁵ These conclusions, unfolding from a Vedantic framework, agree with the holistic point of view of such present-day thinkers as Fritjof Capra.

¹⁸⁶ Now the state of Karnataka.

¹⁸⁷ An opinion shared by the Maharaja's Prime Minister, Mirza Ismail, described earlier.

of a universal language, the use of which would open India to modern science and culture.

In response to Iyer's view that one must first realize Vedanta's metaphysical premises in order to practice its ethical injunctions, one could object that only a few then would be able to put them into practice, given the subtlety of its metaphysics. And if virtue flows from knowing the Truth, practicing the virtues can nevertheless be a way and method for attaining that Truth, helping to dissolve egoism and egotism, and preparing one to perceive the illusory character of the 'I.'

Let us now consider Iyer's political attitudes. Brunton had met Iyer in 1937, ten years before Indian independence. He found Iyer's political position to be clearly distinct from that of Gandhi¹⁸⁸ and other nationalist leaders of the time. Unlike them, Iyer hailed the British occupation as beneficial.¹⁸⁹

In his view, it was Britain's karmic duty to protect India and strengthen her ability to defend herself. He clearly saw the danger posed by civil war, and also felt the degree to which traditional Indian social structures were ill adapted to the modern world. Hinduism's socio-religious laws were not inherently sacred; they had been made by Brahmins, and could be unmade if necessary:

We Hindus who sin against the *pañcama* (untouchables) are no better than Hitler, who has declared that it is "a sin against God to regard all men as equal because the Negroes are an inferior race."

This brings us to Iyer's philosophy of living, a practical wisdom which prefigured Brunton's view of philosophy and the philosopher in the modern world:

Wisdom lies in balancing new and old, harmoniously but fearlessly.

Being too attached to tradition (like Lanza del Vasto and Guénon), was for Iyer as foolish as rejecting it outright for the sake of the new:

The philosopher realizes the truth that the world is changing and that this change is inevitable, a cosmic process. Therefore, he regards as fools those who reject all modern innovations. Take the case of India—we see the caste system breaking down all around us. Yet the laws of Manu were enacted for a society which was based on rigid caste arrangements. Today we have eighty million Muslims in India who were not here in Manu's

¹⁸⁸ Iyer criticized Gandhi's socio-economic vision as backwards-looking and destined to lead India back to the Middle Ages from which British influence had just awakened her.

¹⁸⁹ "The coming of the English was a blessing for India," Iyer told Brunton. The English language was enormously beneficial for India. The English should stay, but over time give India "dominion" status. The West could help India to develop, while benefiting from the wealth of India's philosophy.

time, we have some millions of Indian Christians; what is to be done with them? ... But the greatest change of all is that we are living in a *democratic* era when the very notion of caste is against the spirit of the times, whereas it was the exact spirit of the times thousands of years ago. Hence the philosopher is flexible in mind and would adapt to social forms, to the needs of the time in which he lives. It is rubbish to talk of a social arrangement which must last till all eternity. There is no such thing in Nature and man can't create it. Change, *maya*, is continuous. The philosopher will therefore seek out what is good for the *present* use in ancient forms and then not hesitate to reject the rest, whilst he will add new materials particularly suited to contemporary needs.

We conclude this chapter with a remark of Brunton's which alludes, in our opinion, to his relationship with Subrahmanya Iyer:

Destiny determined that the years of my most critical awakening to the necessity of a complete and radical alteration of my world-view should coincide with the tragic years of the [Second] world war.¹⁹⁰

As we know, Brunton was in Mysore during this period, and *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*, reflecting this new orientation, was written under Iyer's influence. Thus, the "radical alteration" of his world-view referred to above was, beyond any doubt, the fruit of his encounter with the philosophy master of the Maharaja of Mysore.

¹⁹⁰ *Notebooks*, VIII, 3, 136.