

## Book Reviews

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*The Notebooks of Paul Brunton. Vol. 1. Perspectives.* Larson Publications: Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation, Box 89, Hector, NY 14841. Softcover, 1985, \$22.50

Reviewed by Charles T. Tart, Institute Fellow

Paul Brunton (1898-1981) was one of the early pioneers in translating Eastern mystical thought into Western terms. His 1934 book *A Search in Secret India* brought him to prominence with those who were seeking the higher Self, and his later books included such titles as *The Quest for the Overself* and *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga*. He was one of the first writers to begin opening my own mind.

In the mid-1950s Brunton withdrew from public activity and writing to intensify his own spiritual practice. As he writes in the *Notebooks*:

The Writer who sometimes sits behind the writer of these lines, smiling at my puny attempts to translate the Untranslatable, once bade me put away for an indefinite period the thought of any future publications. I obeyed and there was a long silence in the outer world—so long that two obituary notices were printed by newspapers! I had enough leisure to discover the faultiness of the earlier work and felt acutely that the world was better off without my lucubrations. But a day came when I felt the presence of the Presence and I received clear guidance to take the pen again.

The result of this practice is the posthumously published series *The Notebooks of Paul Brunton*, which I can only call a great gift to us Westerners who are seeking the spiritual. I have never felt qualified to use terms like “a person of great spiritual attainment”, but I want to use it in describing the Paul Brunton I am coming to know through these notebooks. I do feel qualified in using terms like “practical” and “sensible”, though, and I am very pleased that Brunton is not only a person of great spiritual attainment, but his ideas are sensible and practical for Westerners. The everyday (and extraordinary) usefulness of his ideas are his gift to us. I shall quote extensively from the first volume of the *Notebooks, Perspectives*, both to give the flavor of his writings and because I cannot make his points more effectively.

Take the issue of material life, for example. Are possessions the root of all evil? Is poverty the only way to approach the spirit?

There is a point of view which rejects the attitude that destitution and dire poverty are the only paths to spirituality and replaces it by the attitude that a simple life and a small number of possessions are better. The poverty-stricken life is usually inadequate and unaesthetic. We need a sufficiency of possessions in order to obtain efficiency of living, and an aesthetic home in order to live the beautiful life. How much more conducive to success in meditation,

for instance, is a well-ordered home, a refined elegant environment, a noiseless undisturbed room or outdoor spot!

Brunton understands that it is our relationship to things, not things themselves, that has primary importance in our journey. For example,

It is not the world that stands in our way and must be renounced but our mental and emotional relationship with the world; and this needs only to be corrected. We may remain just where we are without flight to ashram or convent, provided we make an inner shift. . . .

What happens to a man is important, but not quite so important as what he makes of it.

Over the years I have come to respect the need for balance on the spiritual path, as well as in ordinary life. Gurdjieff put this well in talking about us as three-brained beings who need to develop our intellectual, emotional, and body instinctive brain well and make decisions that take all these aspects of our functioning into account. Brunton's touches on this balance in many ways. For example,

Solicitude for the body to the extent of learning how to care properly for it, how to keep it in good health, how to keep up its strength, will only help and not obstruct solicitude for the soul. The person whose body is breaking down, whose organs are unable to work properly, whose vitality is poor, is likely to become more worried and preoccupied about his body than the person who is free from these troubles. How can he forget the flesh under such conditions? He will be miserably conscious of it far too often. Lofty advice which pays no heed to it and tells him nothing about how to deal with it may sound elevating to his ear but will not be alleviating to his problem. . . .

Recognizing the dangers of unbalanced decision making, Brunton notes that

The intuitive sensitivity of the artist and the discriminating intellect of a scientist are needed to keep that delicate balance which knows when to assume responsibility for one's own decision, action, and life and when to shift this responsibility to a higher power. The novice's statement that he commits his life into God's hand is not enough, for obviously if he continues to repeat the same foolish judgments and the same guilty conduct as before this commitment, his life still remains in the personal ego's hands. If his commitment is to be effective, it must be accompanied by the duty of self-improvement. Surrender to a higher power does not relieve him of this duty; on the contrary, it compels him more than ever before to its carrying out. The shifting of personal responsibility is achieved only when the awakening of consciousness to the higher self is itself achieved. The mere desire and

consequent say-so of the aspirant does not and cannot become factual until then. He may seek to relieve himself of the pressure of obligation and the irritation of obstacles by this device, but the relief will be merely fictional and not factual.

Brunton's old-fashioned sense of responsibility is also refreshing, especially as he understands how beliefs can increase or decrease our responsibility.

The Laws of Karma make each man responsible for his own life. The materialist who denies karma and places all the blame and burden upon the shoulders of environment and heredity denies responsibility. He begins and ends with illusion.

These notebooks are not intended for reading like an ordinary book. Chapters are organized by topics, such as meditation, the body, emotions and ethics, the intellect, the ego, world crisis, psychic experience, the Overself, etc., but within each chapter you have collections of gems, each standing independently rather than continuously. Some of these are a sentence long, some several pages long.

The way to read is to open the book, perhaps at random, read a few selections, and sit down and reflect on them. My wife and I frequently read a few selections aloud to each other and discuss them. It's a good way to start the day. I might add that the art of reading aloud, which has largely been lost in contemporary culture, is well worthwhile, and Brunton's notebooks are especially well suited for it. You hear things aloud that you don't get from reading.

The first six volumes of notebooks have been published, and eight more are to follow. Complete information is available from the foundation whose address was given above.

The resistance of evil is a social duty. Its strongest expression heretofore has been defensive war against a criminally aggressive offending nation. If resistance is itself an evil, war is the most evil form of that evil. The appearance of the atomic bomb is a sign that a new approach must be found today, that the old way of defensive war will not meet the new problems which have arisen. If man is to end war once and for all and find peace, he must do so both internally and externally. He can do the one by ending the rule of the animal aggressive emotions within himself such as greed, anger, revenge and hatred, and he can do the other by abandoning the slaying of his fellow creatures, whether human or animal. He may take whatever defensive preparations he pleases, but he must stop short at the point of killing other men. The refusal to slaughter would then evoke powerful spiritual forces, and if enough persons evoke them the end of war would be assured. However it is unlikely that such an idealistic course would appeal to more than a small minority of mankind. . . .

*Evolution: The Grand Synthesis*

by Ervin Laszlo  
Boston: Shambhala, 1987;  
211 pages; paperback, \$10.95

One of the great needs of our time is to dev the mastery of complexity and uncertainty, q will color governance for decades to come. I not pretend to provide all the answers, but valuable new insights that may greatly understanding of the nature of the transition we one which Laszlo terms a "catastrophic bifurcat affairs. This transition, marked by an explo: population, the loss of traditional valu destabilization of whole societies, will lead t different type of society throughout the world— for worse according to our will and capacity to m

To assist us in this awesome task, Laszlo patterns of change and transformation in the c biological species, and in modern society to cr evolutionary synthesis", a large-scale map that sh we are in the scheme of things and that helps u processes whose outcome will form future sc synthesis rests on the proposition that the course however chaotic it may appear to be, is subject to that can be applied to physical, biological, ec social systems. Evolution, he says, is not c opportunity. Although its path is not predictab controlled.

The means to that control is an unders acceptance of the nature of change, and Laszlo's b a useful tool for this scrutiny. This is an e meaningful book for our time.

*Odd Perceptions*

by Richard L Gregory  
New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987;  
230 pages; cloth, \$19.95

In this stimulating and adventurous bo Gregory presents essays on the rich subject of p how we experience colors, shapes, sounds, touc tastes and smells is a rich and mysterious inquiry. as these sensations are, though, he argues that becomes really interesting when we consider how identified and located in space and time as things with, using our intelligence to understand them.

Gregory's essays convey the crucial import major scientists and their achievements in th perception; but they also show us how much w from our surroundings, our language, our times, o and our failures. Why are we so often fooled, in well as everyday life?

By sharing with us his interests, thought concerns—and the ideas he is himself seduced b Gregory has produced a book that is often fu stimulating and provocative. It is essential reading who is interested in scientific questions and way answers.