

THE SEARCH FOR BRAHMACHARI

by **William Buchanan**

I have been reading Merton since *Thirty Poems* appeared. I have known a number of people who knew him, but it was not part of the Plan that I should meet him myself. Just recently I once more shook a hand that shook Merton's — not literally a handshake but the Indian equivalent of one (*namaskar*).

When I became seriously interested in Vedanta a little over a decade ago, I thought I would look into Merton and Hinduism. Mahanambata Brahmachari, the Hindu friend of Merton's student days, seemed a good place to start. Merton said he took a doctorate at the University of Chicago, but the Registrar there replied to my inquiry with a firm denial that anyone of that name had ever registered in any department of the University. That discouraged me for a while.

I had met Bob Lax in Kalymnos one summer years ago while wandering among the Isles of Greece. I wrote him of my puzzlement. He replied that he had a copy of Brahmachari's thesis stored with his sister in New York. It was 1990 before he could get at it. I discovered that the author had donated two copies of his thesis to the University of Chicago Library. So much for registrars! I later found out that the Library of Congress Authority File inverted his name to "Mahanambata, Brahmachari," perhaps thinking his last name was a title since it means "novice." Their mistake does not excuse the Registrar in my eyes.

I wasn't sure the man was still alive. I had three addresses for him, but he didn't answer letters sent to any of them (and the letters didn't come back either). But some people don't answer letters from friends, let alone total strangers. And, besides, the postal service in India is unreliable. I was going to India anyway, so I thought I would investigate. Swami Lokeshwarananda, Secretary (i.e., Director) of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta heard through mutual friends of my interest, and he invited me to stay at the Institute, stipulating only that I give a talk on Merton. When I arrived, it turned out that the Swami knew Dr. Brahmachari fairly well, though he had not seen much of him in recent years. He put a car and driver at my disposal to take me to him.

I found him in an ashram which was built for him in 1980. He was seated cross-legged, bent over a pad of paper on which he was slowly writing. One disciple was fanning him, another massaging his rather fat back. I did *pranams*, presented fruit, and garlanded him in the traditional manner. I had asked Bob Lax to write me a letter of introduction in case I did meet the man. I presented the letter, and he was delighted to get it. He seemed more interested in talking about Lax than in talking about Merton, though at first I had no idea what he was talking about at all. Then a disciple brought him his dentures. When he had those in his mouth, I found I could understand more, though not easily.

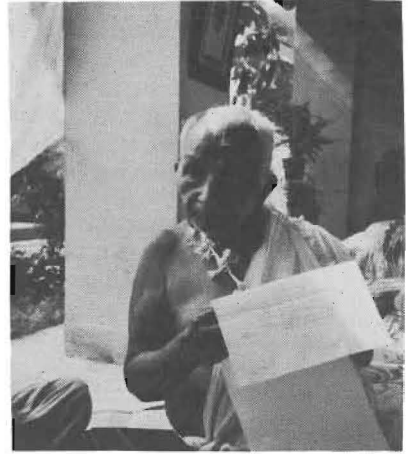
Charles F. Weller, founder-president of the World Fellowship of Faith, in a letter of February 3, 1939, wrote that: "After he won his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, 1939, we sent him on a good-will lecture tour . . . In 63 of our leading cities he delivered 345 addresses. He was a guest in 29 Universities and Colleges."

I was able to talk with a lay disciple who is writing a biography of Dr. Brahmachari. He is a manufacturer rather than a scholar, but his English is good. He explained a number of things to me. He said Dr. Brahmachari is the most compassionate man he has ever known. He cured his son of tuberculosis. At this

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point there are a few facts that I can set straight.

Merton wrote that Brahmachari arrived in Chicago too late for the Parliament of Religions, which was apparently taken over by the World Fellowship of Faith. I have a pamphlet containing four lectures: “Ahimsa,” “Mahatma Gandhi and Universal Brotherhood,” “Lord Jagadbandhu,” and “Hari Purush Jagadbandhu.” The unnamed author of the Foreword says that: “The Second ‘Parliament of Religion’ was held in 1933 at Chicago during its Second ‘World Fair.’ The session opened on June 18.” Brahmachari’s diary states that “on a nice fresh morning in September, 1933, I finally arrived in Chicago.” The editor explains in his quaint Indian English (certainly not written by Brahmachari): “These four lectures, delivered by Dr. Brahmachari before the World Fellowship of Faith (Parliament of Religions) held in Chicago 1938, August. There were other few lectures having no record. These four, considerably shortened, were reserved in a great book, Proceedings of the Conference, published by Right Live Company in New York years ago.” The date 1938, August is certainly wrong, but I don’t know how long the conference lasted.



MAHANAMBRATA
BRAHMACHARI

Next, Ed Rice in *Man in a Sycamore Tree* (p. 69) says that soon after his ordination Merton began to correspond again with Brahmachari, but Brahmachari says he received no such letters. In any case, he doesn’t keep letters and definitely has no Merton letters now. A note in *The Asian Journal* refers to a four page “Tribute to Brahmachari,” written by Merton, and speculates that it was written for a sixtieth birthday *festschrift*. Dr. Brahmachari says he never received it. A volumes of tributes *was* published in 1987. They are mostly in Bengali, although Professor Norris, his thesis adviser at the University of Chicago, contributed a letter in English. There is no mention of Merton (unless it is in Bengali, a language I know nothing of).

Now we come to Merton’s own search for Brahmachari. “On Maniktala Main Road (Calcutta) I saw no sign of Brahmachari’s Ashram, which I am told has moved — no one seems to know where — and I can’t find it” (*The Asian Journal*, November 12, 1968). Mahauddharan Math was founded in 1925 and has been in continuous existence since then. Brahmachari was living there in 1968, although on any given day he might have been away lecturing or visiting devotees. I took a taxi to the ashram. The driver had no difficulty finding it. I attended afternoon *arati* (something like vespers). The *arati* was sung by perhaps twenty women, mostly elderly widows, three or four old men, and a handful of children. After the singing, a monk began a discourse (in Begali, of course). Everything was piped to a loudspeaker on the street, and occasionally a passerby would look in for a while. The whole thing reminded me of a Salvation Army Mission in a slum somewhere. It started to get dark, so I left before it was over. I didn’t want to try to find my way home at night.

Merton spent a morning with Swami Lokeswarananda, a friend of Brahmachari’s. He could have helped Merton locate Brahmachari if he had been asked to do so. Merton’s only surviving letter to Brahmachari, written August 9, 1965 (*The Road to Joy*, p. 121) is a lukewarm and cautious reply to Brahmachari’s suggestion for a visit. Everything seems to point to the conclusion that despite the affection and esteem with which he speaks of Brahmachari in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and “Personal Tribute,” he was not eager for a reunion with the friend he had not seen for twenty-eight years. If this is true, I cannot give a reasonable explanation. I hope to write more about Brahmachari in the future.

Brahmachari kept a daily diary during the whole of his six years in America, but most of it has been lost, although his present biographer is searching for the lost volumes. I was able to read the diary from April 26 to June 24, 1938. During that time he visited the following colleges and universities: Rochester, Syracuse,

Hamilton, Colgate, Williams, Smith, Darman Hall Women's College, Tufts, Northeastern, Vassar, and St. Lawrence. He also visited churches and high schools and was often interviewed on the radio by newspaper reporters. The topics he lectured on include the following: Womanhood of India, Gandhi, Hindu Mysticism and Scripture, Hindu Ideal Life, Hindu Home Life, Hindu Gods in Everyday Living. He often visited classes to answer questions. He mentions cooking Indian meals for people and writing poems. The diaries are mostly factual, though he did include some descriptions, such as Niagara Falls and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. When stopping in New York City, he stayed at International House. In June, he spent quite a bit of time on the seashore while staying with the Freedgoods on Long Island. I transcribe a few excerpts here.

EXCERPTS from BRAHMACHARI'S DIARY

Poughkeepsie to New York to Long Beach, May 16. Take train at 12:00 standard time. Arrive New York, Great Central Terminal at 1:46. Seymour [Freedgood] was waiting for me with another friend. Takes me to the Columbia University to his room — then to the Library and shows me around the campus. Met Prof. Nagel. He phones to Helen, who wants us to come. We take subway first and then train to Long Beach. Arrive at Helen's house. I was here two years ago. Meet Helen's mother — a delightful person — she is a doctor. See Helen on crutches — she had an operation on her feet. Dinner together — Helen, Seymour, Helen's mother. Fred, Seymour's brother, calls for us and takes us to their home. Met Seymmour's mother two years ago when I was in his house too. Seymour has an old grandma. We drive again to see Solomon — a devoted Jew — I met him last time. He was very happy to see me. We drive to see mock flight between aeroplanes. It was almost over. We saw search lights team searching for enemy planes. Back Seymour's home. Rest.

New York — Wednesday, May 25. Taxi to 135 Madison Avenue — the factory of Seymour's father. Leave one passage (shree Murti). Take bus to Columbia. Meet Seymour's room-mate, Mr. Robert Lax. To Philosophy library reading Karl Marx. Meet Mr. Tom Martin [sic]. Three of us go out for lunch after waiting an hour for Seymour hoping he would come. After lunch they take me to one of their girl student friend, Dunny Eilin — her home is in Panama. Happy visit with her. Meet Mr. Larvin a young chap I met two years ago in Long Beach. Meet another friend of Lax. Lax takes me to his mother's room in the Butler Hotel for supper. Visit with his mother for hours after supper. An intelligent thoughtful woman. We go up the roof at the Hotel. An interesting view from the top of the 16th floor of the largest city in the world. Back to Furnwald Hall 434 room. Reading. Rest.

International House, N.Y.C., May 31. Breakfast. Met those friends and a few other new people — one lady from Czechoslovakia. Meeting these various kinds of men and exchanging ideas with them certainly develops one's ideas. To Furnwald Hall, Columbia Univ. meet Bob Lax. Then came Tom Martin. They take me to breakfast again, although I told them that I just had mine. I just went to keep company. Back. Seymour comes. Talk with him. Leave him to Inter-House. To New Yorker. Meet Dr. Majumdar, who was very happy to meet me after a long time. He is very proud over the fact that I am going to preach for John Haynes Holmer. He is ready to help me with other engagements.

New York — Long Beach — New Haven Railway, Monday, June 6. Bid good bye to all friends New Rochelle. New York Grand Central Station at 10:30. Take bus to 135 Madison Avenue. Leave bundles there. Walk to Arcane School wait an hour for Mr. Fox — did not come (appointment made by Mr. Weller). Walk to Freedgood's factory. Take train to Long Beach — arrive about 4:00. Helen there. She does not want to see anyone in order to finish a paper, so we walk to Island Park to see a boat Tom Martin had built. Supper at Seymour's home.

Long Beach, Long Island, June 7. Breakfast. Go to beach, lying on sand reading. Back home. Luncheon. Back to beach. The waves & the roaring sound — very soothing & pleasing. After the long journey of 5 months I feel a bit tired now. Today was the day I was to sail, but I am going to stay 6 months more — why, Lord only knows.