

A BIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS MERCHANT, PH.D.

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"When Francis Merchant (1912-1981) died on January 5, 1981, a teaching and writing career of very special quality ended. Born of immigrant parents and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., he received his college degrees from New York City educational institutions—his B.S. from Brooklyn College, his M.S. from CCNY, and his Ph.D. from New York University.

His compelling interest in matters philosophical and spiritual became evident early in life. Following graduation from college, he was offered a graduate scholarship in mathematics and found it necessary to decide whether literature or mathematics would be his field of specialization. After careful thought he chose literature because of the wider scope it would allow him in his teaching for the discussion of ideas.

While still in college he found himself spending hours in the library reading and studying the religions of the world as well as certain spiritual movements that began in the late nineteenth century, such as Theosophy, New Thought and the Mental Sciences.

He became acquainted with the writings of Alice A. Bailey almost as soon as they began to be available. These more than twenty volumes were dictated to her in full waking consciousness over a period of thirty years (1920-1950) by a Source who wished to be identified only as '*The Tibetan*'. When Mrs. Bailey, shortly before her death, and in a moment of great fatigue, inadvertently let His name slip out, He then confirmed His identity as the **Master Djwhal Khul, senior disciple of Master Koot Hoomi**. In the final sentence of *The Rays and The Initiations*—His last dictated book, He says: '*I sign myself, because it has been given out who I am—as the Master Djwhal Khul*'; this was followed by the familiar signature, '*The Tibetan*'.

These works had a profound impact on the young Francis Merchant, as did another series, the ***Agni Yoga* books**. Helena Roerich, wife of the famous Russian painter and occultist, Nicholas Roerich, was the amanuensis for these volumes, attributed to **Master Morya**. It is a point of considerable interest that both of these series were

given out during the post World War I era, although *Agni Yoga* dictation concluded in the late 1930's.

This fusion of world literature study, with that of the major religious traditions and the esoteric sources resulted in a rich synthesis of thought that characterized Dr. Merchant's teaching and his writing throughout his life.

While he was working on his Ph.D., he became associated with the **Arcane School**—the organization established by Alice Bailey for the study and application of the teachings of *The Tibetan* as they were received. The school's New York Headquarters had established a branch in Tunbridge Wells, England (south of London), to service the English students. From there it was directing the study of students on the Continent. Chief among these was a group of Germans, individuals who had suffered through World War II under the Hitler regime and were desirous of doing their part to recondition the psychological/spiritual atmosphere of their nation in the immediate postwar years.

Mrs. Bailey had become aware of Francis Merchant's fluency in German and asked him if he would accept responsibility for directing the work of these German students from the School's Headquarters in England. He agreed, on condition that he be allowed to continue research on his dissertation while there. She approved, and this experience proved to be a most interesting time for him.

His dissertation, later published separately, was a study of *AE* (George William Russell), the remarkably gifted Irish Theosophist, poet and economist. The closeness to Ireland enabled him to travel there on occasion to interview well-known Irish literary figures, who had known AE, as well as to research sources in Irish libraries.

After his return to New York and the completion of his Ph.D. in English he began his college teaching career in a small Southern college. Although his entire education had been in institutions of higher learning in New York City, almost his entire professional life was lived away from the city of his birth; but this pattern was interrupted briefly in the mid-1950's when he was asked to consider leaving his teaching position and **return to New York to become a full time member of the Headquarters Staff of the Arcane School** at 11 West 42 Street.

Alice Bailey had died in 1950, and the individuals there were working to achieve effective group leadership in accordance with directives from D.K. in some of his last group instructions given through her, which anticipated the problems that would arise following her passing. By this time there were three School offices: in New York; Tunbridge Wells, England; and Geneva, Switzerland—the pattern, which continues to the present, except for the fact that the English Headquarters has now been established in London.

Dr. Merchant accepted the offer and appeared at his desk, which happened to be just opposite mine, in the summer of 1955. I had been accepted as a member of the Arcane School shortly before my thirtieth birthday (the preceding year)—at the same time that I was pursuing Ph.D. studies at New York University in the late afternoon and evening hours. The more senior members of the Headquarters were interesting in integrating a young person into their group, so I had become a staff member within the year. The following months of working together resulted in the establishing of great compatibility and bonds of deep affections, and we were married a year later.

It was at this juncture that we were faced with a major professional decision. Both of us had already had some earlier college teaching experience and strongly desired careers in this area. At the same time we were committed to our spiritual studies. It so happened that this was also a time of change for the Arcane School. A reorganization in the New York office was about to take place; events were in flux, and it seemed an opportune moment to explore the option of establishing ourselves as college professors, while continuing our personal association with the School—and, of course, our ongoing regimes of meditation and study.

And so, it was that we found ourselves six months later in the Southwest. For many years my husband and I happily shared college teaching careers. Because we were interested in becoming acquainted with various parts of this country, we took positions in areas as widely distant as New Mexico, Wisconsin, and the Southern states of North Carolina and Georgia. During this period he served as professor and as chairman of the English Department and Division of the Humanities.

During this wide experience of working with students of all races and creeds, his metaphysical approach to the problems of humanity was often expressed. Whether he was teaching or writing, he was always addressing the human condition, the ongoing human dilemma, with a voice of higher reason and spiritual insight.

His predilection for metaphysical thinking is the **golden thread** that unifies practically all of his writing. '*All problems are metaphysical*', he would say. He once used this statement as the title of a lecture he gave to a Theosophical group in Chicago. His basic stance was that of philosopher, espousing a philosophy of metaphysics and a psychology of metaphysics. This approach accounts for the wide range of human problems that came under his scrutiny, as well as for the power of synthesis that integrated all his literary work, regardless of the variety of outward forms he used. The light streaming from the Wisdom teachings inspired his own insights and illuminated his interpretation of the diverse fields of knowledge through which he expressed himself, whether it was philosophy, comparative religion, psychology, poetry, drama or symbolism.

His original insights—fused with his highly developed literary skills lend a unique and sometimes controversial quality to his presentations. He strikes his own resonant note, filled with the overtones of beauty and based on Universal principles and Spiritual synthesis.

Among his favorite themes are: the Divinity in man; the paradox of man's physical frailty contrasting with the surging upward thrust of aspiration to the Highest; the Brotherhood of man; the Justice of the Cosmos (based on Universal Laws); the symbolism evident in Nature; and the significance of the stars, including man's and Earth's relationship to them. The beauty and awesome splendor of the stars appealed powerfully to his poetic, imaginative sense; our relationship to them he intuitively grasped as a spiritual fact of life.

An additional theme, apparently more mundane, should be mentioned as basic to his thinking—and that is the crucial element of choice in the unfolding human drama. As he liked to point out, the very act of refusing to make a choice is itself a choice.

His publications reveal a wide spectrum of interest. The earliest was *AE*, which, as we have said, he researched and wrote while living in England and serving as the head of the German section of the Arcane School. Later works include: *The Golden Hoard*, *Great Images* (biographical essays on outstanding spiritual achievers), *The Delightful Art Of Writing, Symbol and Fancy* (drama and poetry), *The Face Of Loneliness*, *A Search For Identity* (psychology), *The Path Of The Fiery Rainbow*, *Bestriding Pegasus* (poetry), *The Lighted Way*, *The Messenger And His Treasure*, and *Arcane Stories*.

The Tail Of The Dragon (symbolism); which includes *Soaring With Symbols*, and *Metaphysical Psychology And A Course In Metaphysical Counseling* were written during his years of retirement and published posthumously.

A word should probably be said at this point about the special quality of ***The Golden Hoard***. Dr. Merchant had an unusually strong interest in presenting the Wisdom Teachings in literary forms that would be meaningful for a broader sector of the general public (than the original group to whom they had been given). ***The Golden Hoard* is his discussion of the principal themes contained in the more than twenty volumes of Teaching given out by Master D.K.—presented in non-esoteric and non-technical terms, to aid in the dissemination of these ideas into the mainstream of intellectual thought.** Published in 1959, it stands as a unique contribution to esoteric literature, as relevant today as it was then, although written years before the explosion of New Age material that characterizes our present time.

My husband had a wide range of interests. He was a gifted amateur artist, taught himself to play the piano, flute, and trumpet, and enjoyed gardening.

For years he served as both contributing author and trustee for 'Fellowship in Prayer'. Most notably, he shaped this organization's Course in Prayer, which was published many years ago. He then was moved to write for them a series of articles on various world religions and philosophies, in each instance striving to present a fresh approach and an additional dimension of meaning to familiar ideas.

Francis Merchant's view of humanity was a subtle blend of idealism, a realism that recognized the cross-grained quality of human nature co-existing with the Divine, and a

wry sense of humor that was an enormous aid in maintaining a balanced perspective. He did not underestimate the difficulty facing the human race as it strains to press forward into greater Light. His personality, at times, reflected the urgency he sensed about the crisis of our times and his convictions about the strenuous spiritual efforts necessary to save the future of humanity.

As he wrote in his brief poem:

TASK

*'We fight for light
By day and night,
Forever strive
To keep alive
The Spirit's glow
Midst ebb and flow
Of that great dance
called circumstance'.*

Above all, he had an utterly unshakable conviction of the high and glorious Spiritual destiny of humanity, united in the bonds of brotherhood under the Fatherhood of God. This Spirit of the Divine Warrior in his nature shines through every line of one of his last poem:

QUEST

*' Nor fog nor mist
Make us desist
Nor fortune's slings
Can clip our wings,
Nor do we quail
Or fear to fail,
In such a test
The quest is blessed'.*

The beauty of his life may indeed be summed up in his own words:

*'I have not lost faith
and that, in truth
is my victory'."*

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