



Still the Mind

An Introduction to Meditation

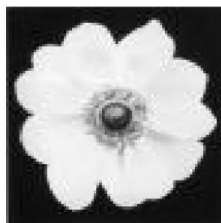


Alan Watts



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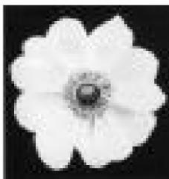
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PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

BY MARC ALLEN

ALAN WATTS BECAME FAMOUS in the 1950s as a brilliant, intense intellectual, a former Episcopalian priest with a vast knowledge of both Eastern and Western religious and spiritual traditions. Unlike most of his peers, though, he embraced and actually practiced the various traditions he studied. His understanding, expressed through a great number of books and public talks, was peerless.

In the 1960s, he became a serious student of Zen Buddhism, and was a teacher — and eventually dean — at the American Academy of Asian Studies (now CIIS, the California Institute of Integral Studies). The popularity of his books and talks soared. He gave a weekly talk on San Francisco public radio that was

broadcast nationally. A large number of people listened every Sunday morning; many considered it their church service.

Watts lived on a houseboat in Sausalito, just north of San Francisco, which became renowned as a center of endless discussions, parties, and meditation sessions, with famous and infamous spiritual leaders, gurus, intellectuals, writers, and others continually dropping by.

He continued to practice his meditation, and his writing and talks deepened. More and more, he was leading people into meditation and spiritual experience rather than just talking about it.

In the last years of his life, he left the houseboat and retreated to a small, isolated cabin deep in the woods. He spent nearly every morning alone, usually beginning with a Japanese tea ceremony followed by a period of meditation and contemplation. Then he would write.

His writing and speaking grew quieter and deeper. This book has been transcribed from recordings of several talks he gave in his later years. They show a maturity and an understanding of his subject that only comes after years of meditation. He had transformed over the years from a serious intellectual to a joyous, spontaneous lover of life.

His words are still leading-edge, as fresh today as when they were spoken many years ago. He is a writer

and student and teacher who will be remembered, and this book shows us why:

He is able to use words to take us beyond them; he is able to instill in readers and listeners not only an understanding of meditation but an actual spiritual experience as well.



I N T R O D U C T I O N

BY MARK WATTS

IN THE BEGINNING of *Still the Mind*, Alan Watts mentions the gift he had been given — and it was a unique gift. Watts was able to take his readers and listeners on a journey beyond the often-ignored limitations of calculation and reckoning. Perhaps the greatest part of this gift was his ability to show us how to discover simple ways of getting out of the mental trap we create for ourselves.

In our modern society, it has become apparent that the power-based world — the world of politics, government, and international finance that influences all of us — has been absolutely hypnotized and driven crazy by words and by thoughts. We have become slaves to recurring patterns in an endless

stream of words. Our political leaders talk incessantly about our many problems, but it's as if they're speaking a foreign language one might call "memorandese." Almost everyone has had the experience of watching a political debate and wondering afterward what on earth the candidates were talking about. To some degree, all civilized people are out of touch with reality because we fail to distinguish between the way things are and the way they are described. For politicians this dichotomy has reached extreme proportions, but it affects everyone. We confuse money, which is an abstraction, with real wealth; we confuse the idea of who we are with the actual experience of our organic existence.

During the sixties and early seventies, Alan Watts lectured at universities and blossoming growth centers across the country. To help his audiences better understand their connection with the world, he would describe in great detail the many ways that our organic existence inseparably connects us to the entire world. Starting when I was sixteen, and on into my early twenties, I followed along whenever I could with a portable tape deck, recording his talks.

Whether the title of his talk was *Ecological Awareness*, *The Psychology of Mystical Experience*, or *The Practice of Zen Meditation*, he would often return to the theme of the inseparability of man and world. It was

something he grasped on a deep level and could invariably help his audiences understand. His essential point was that one's actual organic being is inseparable from the universe, but the distinct idea you have of this distinct wiggle of the whole universe, which you call your body, can very easily persuade you to accept the illusion that you are a separate entity.

One reason we fall for the idea of the separate, isolated self is that, even though we admire the beauty of the natural world, nearly everyone who has grown up in Western society has certain misgivings about actually living as an integral part of nature. Instead, we adopt certain conventions that allow us to live in modern society; we cultivate our consciousness in order to "rise above" the level of natural instinct.

At one extreme, we are rugged individualists who feel the need to conquer the physical world and claim new territory for mankind. But even those who do not try to dominate the world in a physical sense may try to overcome what they perceive as their animal nature through the repression of their natural desires. We see this manifested nearly everywhere in our culture in conscious attempts to adhere to abstract ideals of virtuous living.

But as Carl Jung wrote in his essay *The Stages of Life* that "instinct cares nothing for consciousness." Like my father, Jung believed that the problems we have are manifestations of our consciousness, and more

particularly, the direct result of self-consciousness and our attempt to make things better. This is at the root of so many of the dilemmas we create in so many areas of our lives.

Look at the issue of ecology, for example: Although we sincerely want to get along with nature and not destroy it, we still see ourselves as people living separately from the natural world. We are still not a part of it, due to a trick of perception that many people have called the ego. In reality the whole problem is a mental trap, and the only way out of the trap is to wake up and simply *be* in the real world.

It is necessary therefore to experience the real world directly — but here we run into a problem because some people believe that the real world is the spiritual world and others believe it is the physical world. Both of these, however, are simply ideas, concepts. As Alan Watts and so many others keep pointing out, the real art of connecting with the universe is to *stop thinking*, at least from time to time.

Practicing the art of meditation or contemplation can help us stop the perpetual chatter that goes on inside our skulls. As my father often said, “A person who thinks all the time has nothing to think about except thoughts, and lives in a world of illusions.” To the degree we can stop thinking and start experiencing, we are getting back to sanity, and to reality. In meditation

or contemplation we can occasionally discover a state of consciousness that is truly not self-conscious. But the only way to do this is by allowing all attempts to mentally describe the world to cease. If we talk all the time, we won't hear what anyone else has to say, and if we think all the time, we will never experience the nature of our organic existence.

In the following pages we will explore what lies at the heart of what may still to this day be considered a new way of thinking and living. As Alan Watts and many others have understood, there is nothing new in it: We are connecting — or reconnecting — with an energy as old as the universe, and with a form of wisdom at least as old as the human race, well understood by indigenous peoples and brilliantly taught by Buddhists and Hindus.

In *Still the Mind*, we are taken on an experiential journey. By participating in the experiments suggested, you will find a way to get back in touch with the reality that exists beyond our thinking — the great, unified reality our thoughts are supposed to represent but can never capture or express.

Alan Watts says it much more clearly than I do — and it has been a gratifying experience for me to spend so much time with the hundreds of hours of his words that were recorded on tape. He is a speaker and writer

whose voice has continued to have a great impact many years after his passing, and I believe it is well worth spending a few quiet hours from time to time with the book you're holding in your hands. You will see how he used words and thoughts to guide us beyond our words and thoughts, and you will come to understand that we are far greater, far more miraculous in our nature than our words can express.

P A R T I

THE ESSENTIAL PROCESS
OF THE WORLD





C H A P T E R O N E

WHO WE ARE IN THE UNIVERSE

I WAS TAUGHT when I was a little boy that it was good to be unselfish and loving, and I used to think that I should grow up to serve other people. But after a while I found out that unless one has something to give people, there is nothing one can do to help them. Just because I thought I ought to help, it didn't mean that I had anything to give.

Gradually, over the years, as I understood what it was that I had received of significance from the world, I realized that these things were never intended as gifts to be given in the usual sense of the word. However much one enjoys the song of birds, they are not singing for the advancement of music, and the clouds are not floating across the sky to be painted by artists.

person, you must realize that you are allowing them to pick your pocket and sell you your own watch.

How can you be certain with any great teacher (or scripture for that matter) that they know what they say they know? You may believe in a religion; that is a choice you have made. But how do you know, and why do you believe?

If you believe in something simply because the Bible says it is true, for instance, you do so because you believe that the Bible has the authority to tell you it is true. You may well say that your fathers and mothers and all sorts of reliable people believed it, and therefore you have accepted it on their authority. If you are curious, however, you will also ask, "How did they know it was true?" Did they, by their light and example, show that they were enormously improved because of their belief?

If we look at human history with a clear eye, we see that over an appallingly long period of time people have not improved very much despite their religions and ideals. When you become a grandfather with five grandchildren as I am, you realize that you are just as stupid as your own grandfather was because you still look at things from your own limited position. And although my grandchildren may think that I am a wise and venerable man with a beard, I know that I am still a child, and I feel pretty much as I have always felt. So when you set

someone up as an authority, never forget that the belief that you have in this authority is just your opinion.

IT RESTS ON OUR AUTHORITY

When De Tocqueville said that the people get the government they deserve, he was quite right. We allow the government, whether it be political or spiritual, to get away with it, and so it rests on our authority. This is true also of God. If you believe in God — that God is good, or that God is God at all — it is your opinion. And so God derives from you, and therefore this thought has some very peculiar implications with regard to the government of the universe.

Awareness of the source of spiritual authority — understanding that it comes from us, from the people — may imply that there is some sort of democracy in the kingdom of Heaven. Of course it does not overthrow God, except in the sense of a certain kind of God, and most people do not realize that there can be many quite different ideas of God.

God does not have to be a monarch; there can also be an organic god. There are also personal and impersonal gods, and there are gods that are neither personal nor impersonal. There are gods that exist and gods that do not exist, and there are gods that neither exist nor do not exist. But whatever you believe God is, it always goes back to *you*.



ALAN WATTS became famous first as a brilliant intellectual and then as a serious student of Buddhism and meditation. In the 1970s, the last years of his life, he retreated to a small, isolated cabin deep in the woods. He meditated every morning, then wrote.

This wonderful book has been transcribed from recordings of several talks Watts gave in these later years, recorded and edited by his son, Mark. His speaking shows a maturity and wisdom that can only come after years of meditation, and his words are still as visionary today as when they were first spoken.

Simply watch everything going on without attempting to change it in any way, without judging it, without calling it good or bad. Just watch it. That is the essential process of meditation.

Alan Watts is able to use words to take us beyond them. He is able to instill in readers not only an understanding of meditation, but an experience of it as well. Whether you are experienced in meditation or just beginning, *Still the Mind* is an invaluable guide that takes you on a wonderful journey that shows you the great miracle of who you really are.



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