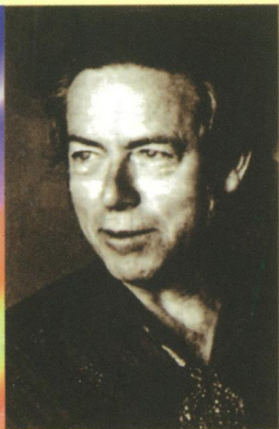


THE TAO OF PHILOSOPHY



Alan Watts

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THE TAO OF
PHILOSOPHY

THE EDITED TRANSCRIPTS

Alan Watts

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CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
Foreword: On Philosophical Synthesis	xiii
I. Myth of Myself	i
II. Man in Nature	17
III. Symbols and Meaning	35
IV. Limits of Language	43
V. Images of God	53
VI. Sense of Nonsense	63
VII. Coincidence of Opposites	71
VIII. Seeing Through the Net	81

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Tao of Philosophy*, and to some remarkable ideas about the role of philosophical inquiry and the “true purpose” of living. These thoughts spring from a life-long study of Eastern philosophy by an inspired and articulate Westerner, Alan Watts. A prolific writer and speaker, Watts is well known for his numerous books on Christianity, Zen, Hinduism, and Taoism, including his classic *The Way of Zen*. Originally from England, Watts was the Chaplain at Northwestern University during the time of World War II. Following the publication of *Behold the Spirit* in

INTRODUCTION

1947, Watts left the Church in 1950, and soon thereafter traveled to California to teach at the Academy for Asian Studies in San Francisco with Dr. Fredrick Spiegelberg.

Three years later Watts began the “Way Beyond the West” radio series on KPFA in Berkeley. His radio talks were so well received in the Bay Area that they continued on KPFA for thirty years. At various times the shows also aired on other Pacifica stations in Los Angeles, New York, and Boston on Sunday mornings, and became popularly known as “the hangover cure” in the late sixties and early seventies. During this period the *Los Angeles Times* reviewed his books and described Watts as “perhaps the foremost Western interpreter of Eastern thought.” He spoke regularly at colleges, seminar centers, and progressive churches across the country. The Sunday radio programs were by that time recorded in the field instead of at the studios of KPFA, and his early radio style of presentation gave way to a dynamic speaking style that earned him a reputation as a modern philosopher/entertainer. Alan Watts passed away in 1973 in the midst of writing a companion volume to *The Way of Zen* on Taoism.

Recently, when I began to select original live recordings to re-introduce radio audiences to my father’s spoken works, many of his later talks with generally Taoist themes stood out as excellent examples of his mature philosophy. It was apparent that he felt comfortable with a view of the world which is “of itself so,” and not the construct of a personified ultimate reality. The wisdom of working with the course and current of nature to solve the problems of ecological balance also appealed to his sensibilities, and he spoke of the “organism/environment” as “more nearly us than I.”

The Tao of Philosophy is a literary adaptation of talks selected to introduce the new “Love of Wisdom”

series to today's audiences. The following chapters provide rich examples of the way in which the philosophy of the Tao is as contemporary today as it was when it flourished in China thousands of years ago. Perhaps most significantly, these selections offer modern society a clearer understanding of what it will take for a successful reintegration of humans in nature.

We begin with a foreword written in July of 1953, entitled "On Philosophical Synthesis." The contrast between the style of this earlier article and the following chapters reveals the transformation Watts underwent as he moved from the academic environment, in which these questions were first raised, to the personal experience, in which they were resolved. For as his close friend, poet Elsa Gidlow, wrote of his growing into the spirit of the Tao:

. . . it transformed him as he allowed it to permeate his being, so that the reserved, somewhat uptight young Englishman, living overmuch in his head, in his mature years became an outgoing, spontaneously playful, joyous world sage. He believed that a widespread absorption of the profound wisdom of Taoism could similarly transform the West.

—Mark Watts
1995, San Anselmo, California

FOREWORD

ON PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS

In many respects the formal, academic philosophy of the West has come to a dead end, having confined itself to a method of inquiry which compels it to move in a vicious circle. This is especially true in epistemology, which, because it involves the whole work of self-knowledge, is really the central problem of philosophy. As the West understands it, epistemology is really the task of trying to “think thought”—to construct words about words about words—since philosophical thinking is, for us, not a changing but a verbalization of experience.

The inquiring mind is perennially fascinated with the problem of the mind’s own nature and origins—not

FOREWORD

only to know just by way of information *what* knowing is, but also to employ such information for the greater control of the knower, for is it not frequently said that *the* problem of modern man is to be able to control himself as effectively as he can control his environment?

But there is a basic contradiction in the attempt of reason to transcend itself. To know the knower, to control the controller, and to think thought implies a circular and impossible situation, like the effort to bite one's own teeth. It is for this reason that modern logical philosophy tends to dismiss such inquiries as "metaphysical and meaningless" and to confine philosophy to the investigation of relatively pedestrian problems of logic and ethics. This situation has arisen in the West because, for us, "to know" really means "to control"; that is, to see how events may be fitted to consistent orders of words and symbols so that we may predict and govern their course. But this mania for control leads ultimately to a barren confusion, because we ourselves are by no means separated from the environment we are trying to control. Western man has been able to pursue this mania only so far because of his acute feeling of individual isolation, of the separation of his "I" from all else. Thus, in philosophy, in technology, and in the whole ordering of our society, we run into the ancient problem of *Quis custodiet custodiet?*—who guards the guard, polices the policeman, plans the planner, and controls the controller? The logical end of all this is the totalitarian state of George Orwell's *1984*, the nightmare of mutual espionage.

On the other hand, such major Oriental philosophies as the Vedanta, Buddhism, and Taoism arise in cultures far less concerned with controlling the world, and in which the whole notion of the dominance of the universe by man (the conscious ego) seems palpably

absurd. For all these philosophies it is a first principle that the seeming separateness of the ego from the world, so that it could be its own controller, is an illusion. Individual consciousness did not contrive itself and, not being *sui generis* (un-born, *anutpanna*), can never be the directive source of life.

Thus, for Oriental philosophy, knowledge is not control. It is rather the "sensation"—the vivid realization—that "I" am not this individualized consciousness alone, but the matrix from which it arises. This knowledge consists, not in a verbal proposition, but in a psychological change, similar to that which occurs in the cure of a psychosis. One in whom this change has come to pass does not attempt to control the world, or himself, by the efforts of his own will. He learns the art of "letting things happen," which is no mere passivity but, on the contrary, a creative technique familiar to the activity of many artists, musicians, and inventors in our own culture, whereby skill and insight are found to be the fruits of a certain "dynamic" relaxation.

It is obvious that a philosophy, a wisdom, which offers deliverance from the vicious circle of "controlling the controller" is of immense value to cultures, like our own, which are hopelessly confused by their schemes to organize themselves. However, it will be extraordinarily difficult for a wisdom of this kind to come within the scope of Western philosophy unless the latter can admit that philosophy is more than logic, more than verbalization, to the point where philosophy can include the transformation of the very processes of the mind, and not simply of the words and symbols which the mind employs.

THE TAO OF
PHILOSOPHY

THE EDITED TRANSCRIPTS

MYTH OF MYSELF

CHAPTER ONE

I believe that if we are honest with ourselves, the most fascinating problem in the world is “Who am I?” What do you mean and what do you feel when you say the word “I”? I do not think there can be a more fascinating preoccupation than that because it is so elusive and hidden. What you are in your inmost being escapes your examination in rather the same way that you can not look directly into your own eyes without using a mirror, and that is why there is always an element of profound mystery in the question of who we are. This problem has fascinated me for many years and so I have asked a number of people, “What do you mean by the word ‘I’?” Now there is a certain agreement

CHAPTER ONE

about this especially among people who live in Western civilization, and we have what I have called the conception of ourselves as a skin-encapsulated ego.

Most of us feel “I”—my ego, my self, my source of consciousness—to be a center of awareness and of a source of action that resides in the middle of a bag of skin. It is very funny how we use the word “I.” In common speech, we are not accustomed to say, “I am a body.” We rather say, “I have a body.” We do not say, “I beat my heart” in the same way we say, “I walk, I think, I talk.” We feel that our heart beats itself, and that has nothing very much to do with “I.” In other words, we do not regard “I, myself” as identical with our whole physical organism. We regard it as something inside it, and most Western people locate their ego inside their heads. You are somewhere between your eyes and between your ears, and the rest of you dangles from that point of reference. This is not so in other cultures. When a Chinese or Japanese person wants to locate the center of himself, he points to what Japanese call the *kokoro* and the Chinese call *shin*, the heart-mind. Some people also locate themselves in the solar plexus, but by and large we locate ourselves behind the eyes and somewhere between the ears. It is as if within the dome of the skull there was some sort of arrangement such as there is at SAC Air Force headquarters in Denver where men sit in great rooms surrounded with radar screens and all sorts of monitors, watching the movements of planes all over the world. So, in the same way, we have really the idea of ourselves as a little person inside our heads who has earphones on which bring messages from the ears, and who has a television set in front of him which brings messages from the eyes, and has all sorts of electrodes all over his body giving him signals from the hands, and so on. He has a panel in front of him with buttons and

dials and things, and so he more or less controls the body. He is not the same as the body because "I" am in charge of what are called the voluntary actions, but what are called the involuntary actions of the body happen to me. I am pushed around by them, although to some extent also I can push my body around. This, I have concluded, is the ordinary, average conception of what is one's self.

Look at the way children, influenced by our cultural environment, ask questions. "Mommy, who would I have been if my father had been someone else?" The child gets the idea from our culture that the father and mother gave him a body into which he was popped at some moment; whether it was conception or parturition is a little bit vague, but there is in our whole way of thinking the idea that we are a soul, a spiritual essence of some kind, imprisoned inside a body. We look out upon a world that is foreign to us and, in the words of the poet A.E. Housman, perceive "I, a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made." Therefore we speak of confronting reality, facing the facts. We speak of coming into this world, and there is a sensation we are brought up with of being an island of consciousness locked up in a bag of skin. Outside us we face a world that is profoundly alien to us in the sense that what is outside "me" is not me, and this sets up a fundamental sensation of hostility and estrangement between ourselves and the so-called external world. Therefore we go on to talk about the conquest of nature, the conquest of space, and view ourselves in a kind of battle array towards the whole world outside us. I shall have much more to say about that in the second chapter, but in the first I want to examine the strange feeling of being an isolated self.

Now actually it is absolutely absurd to say that we came into this world. We did not: we came out of it!

CHAPTER ONE

What do you think you are? Suppose this world is a tree. Are you leaves on its branches or are you a bunch of birds from somewhere else that settled on a dead old tree? Surely everything that we know about living organisms—from the standpoint of the sciences—shows us that we grow out of this world, that each one of us is what you might call a symptom of the state of the universe as a whole. However, that is not part of our common sense.

Western man has, for many centuries, been under the influence of two great myths. When I use the word “myth” I do not necessarily mean a falsehood. The word myth signifies a great idea in terms of which man tries to make sense with the world; it may be an idea, or it may be an image. Now the first of two images which have most profoundly influenced Western man is the image of the world as an artifact, much like a jar made by a potter. Indeed, in the Book of Genesis there comes the idea that man was originally a clay figurine made out of the earth by the Lord God who then breathed into this clay figurine and gave it life. The whole of Western thought is profoundly influenced through and through by the idea that all things—all events, all people, all mountains, all stars, all flowers, all grasshoppers, all worms—are artifacts; they have been made. It is therefore natural for a Western child to say to its mother, “How was I made?” On the other hand, that would be quite an unnatural question for a Chinese child, because the Chinese do not think of nature as something that was made. Instead, they look upon it as something that grows, and the two processes are quite different. When you make something you put it together: you assemble parts, or you carve an image out of wood or stone, working from the outside to the inside. However, when you watch something grow, it works in an entirely

different way. It does not assemble its parts. It expands from within and gradually complicates itself, expanding outwards, like a bud blossoming or a seed turning into a plant.

Yet behind our whole thought process in the West is the idea that the world is an artifact and that it is put together by a celestial architect, carpenter, and artist, who therefore knows how it was done. When I was a little boy I asked many questions which my mother could not answer. She used to resort in desperation to saying, "My dear, there are some things that we are not meant to know," and I would say, "Well, will we ever find out?" And she would answer, "Yes, when we die and we go to Heaven it will all be made clear." So I used to think that on wet afternoons in Heaven we would all sit around the throne of grace and say to the Lord God, "Now, just why did you do it this way, and how did you manage at that?" and He would explain it and make it all very clear. All questions would be answered because, as we have in popular theology understood the Lord God, He is the mastermind who knows everything. If you ask the Lord God exactly how high is Mount Whitney to the nearest millimeter, He would know exactly, just like that, and would tell you. You could ask any question of God, because He is the cosmic *Encyclopedia Britannica*. However, this particular image, or myth, became too much for Western man because it is oppressive to feel that you are known through and through, and watched all the time by an infinitely just judge.

I have a friend who is a very enlightened Catholic convert, and in her bathroom she has an old-fashioned toilet, and on the pipe that connects the tank with the toilet seat there is a little framed picture of an eye. Underneath it, in Gothic letters, is written "Thou God

CHAPTER ONE

seest me.” Everywhere is this eye—watching, watching, watching—watching and judging you, so that you always feel you are never really by yourself. The old gentleman is observing you and writing notes in his black book, and the idea of this became too much for the West. We had to get rid of it, and so instead we developed another myth, the myth of the purely mechanical universe. This myth was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, and became increasingly fashionable throughout the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, so that today it is common sense. Very few people today really believe in God in the old sense. They say they do, but although they really hope there is a God, they do not really have faith in God. They fervently wish that there was one, and feel that they ought to believe that there is, but the idea of the universe being ruled by that marvelous old gentleman is no longer plausible. It is not that anybody has disproved it, but it just somehow does not go with our knowledge of the vast infinitude of galaxies and of the immense light-year distances between them, and so on.

Instead, it has become fashionable, and it is nothing more than a fashion, to believe that the universe is dumb and stupid, and that intelligence, values, love, and fine feelings reside only within the bag of the human epidermis, and beyond that it is simply a kind of a chaotic, stupid interaction of blind forces. For example, courtesy of Dr. Freud, we have the idea that biological life is based on something called “libido,” which was a very loaded word. This blind, ruthless, uncomprehending lust is seen as the foundation of the human unconscious, and to thinkers of the nineteenth century like Hegel, Darwin, and T.H. Huxley, there was similarly the notion that at the root of being is an energy, and this energy is blind. This energy is just energy, and it is utterly and totally

stupid, and our intelligence is an unfortunate accident. By some weird freak of evolution we came to be these feeling and rational beings, at least more or less rational, but all this is a ghastly mistake because we are here in a universe that has nothing in common with us. It does not share our feelings, has no real interest in us, and we are just a sort of cosmic fluke. Therefore, the only hope for mankind is to beat this irrational universe into submission, to conquer it and master it. Of course all this is perfectly idiotic. If you think that the idea of the universe has been the creation of a benevolent old gentleman, you soon realize He is not so benevolent after all, and He takes an attitude of "this is going to hurt me more than it is going to hurt you." You can have that idea on the one hand, and if that becomes uncomfortable you can exchange it for its opposite idea that the ultimate reality does not have any intelligence at all, and at least that would get rid of the old bogey in the sky in exchange for a picture of the world that is completely stupid.

Of course, these ideas do not really make any sense because you cannot get an intelligent organism, such as a human being, out of an unintelligent universe. You do not find an intelligent organism living in an unintelligent environment. Here is a tree in the garden, and every summer it produces apples; and we call it an apple tree because the tree "apples"—that is what it does. Here is a solar system inside a galaxy, and one of the peculiarities of this solar system is that, at least on the planet earth, it "peoples" in just the same way that an apple tree "apples." Now, maybe two million years ago, somebody came from another galaxy in a flying saucer and had a look at this solar system, and they looked it over and shrugged their shoulders and said, "Just a bunch of rocks," and they went away. Later on,

CHAPTER ONE

two million years later, they came around again and they looked at it and they said, "Excuse me, we thought it was a bunch of rocks but it is peopling, and it is alive after all; it has done something intelligent." We grow out of this world in exactly the same way that the apples grow on the apple tree, and if evolution means anything, it means that. But curiously, we twist it. We say, "Well, first of all in the beginning there was nothing but gas and rock. Then intelligence happened to arise in it like a sort of fungus or slime on the top of the whole thing." However, we are thinking in a way that disconnects the intelligence from the rocks. Where there are rocks, watch out, because the rocks are going eventually to come alive and they are going to have people crawling over them. It is only a matter of time, just in the same way the acorn is eventually going to turn into the oak because it has the potentiality of that within it. Watch out, because rocks are not dead.

Now all of this depends on what kind of attitude you want to take to the world. If you want to put the world down, you might say, "Oh well, fundamentally it is only a lot of geology, sheer stupidity, and it just so happens that a kind of a freak comes up in it which we call consciousness." Now, that is an attitude that you may take when you want to prove to people that you are a tough guy, that you are realistic, that you face facts, and that you do not indulge in wishful thinking. However, it is just a matter of role-playing, and you must be aware of these things; these are fashions in the intellectual world. On the other hand, if you feel warm-hearted towards the universe, you put it up, instead of putting it down, and you say about rocks, "They are really conscious, but it is a different form of consciousness." After all, when I tap on this crystal, which is glass, it makes a noise. Now that resonance is an

because we do not remember, and so we think when we die that is just going to be that. Some people console themselves with the idea that they are going to Heaven, or that they are going to be reincarnated, or something, but people do not really believe that. For most people it is implausible, and the real thing that haunts them is that when they die they will go to sleep and are never going to wake up. They are going to be locked up in the safe deposit box of darkness forever and ever. However, all of this depends upon a false notion of what is one's self. Now, the reason why we have this false notion of ourselves, as far as I can understand it, is that we have specialized in one particular kind of consciousness. Generally speaking, we have two kinds of consciousness. One I will call the "spotlight," and the other the "floodlight." The spotlight is what we call conscious attention, and we are trained from childhood that it is the most valuable form of perception. When the teacher in class says, "Pay attention!" everybody stares, and looks right at the teacher. That is spotlight consciousness; fixing your mind on one thing at a time. You concentrate, and even though you may not be able to have a very long attention span, nevertheless you use your spotlight: one thing after another, one thing after another . . . flip, flip, flip, flip, flip. However, we also have floodlight consciousness. For example, you can drive your car for several miles with a friend sitting next to you, and your spotlight consciousness may be completely absorbed in talking to your friend. Nevertheless, your floodlight consciousness will manage the driving of the car, will notice all the stoplights, the other idiots on the road, and so on, and you will get there safely without even thinking about it.

However, our culture has taught us to specialize in spotlight consciousness, and to identify ourselves with that form of consciousness alone. "I am my spotlight