

Shut up and lick your lollipop: a personal view of Alan Watts

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At the beginning of February 1978 my wife of six years announced to me that she was leaving. We had a three-year-old daughter, and my immediate response was to say that if she wanted to go she should go, but that she wasn't taking our child, Olivia, with her. It took 10 days for her statement of intent to become action. They were a painful 10 days.

It wasn't until five further weeks had passed that a friend of mine pointed out to me that, perhaps, my daughter should be with her mother. My wife had been calling several times a day for several weeks, begging me to let her have our daughter. This I did, one further week on.

We had been running an antiquarian bookshop since 1975, in an old grocer's shop which had been abandoned in 1943, in Islington, north London. We lived above it. The day my wife actually left, I was sitting in the shop when Jack Percalle, brother of the poet Hugo Manning, came in and sat down next to my desk. He had been in the shop before, but not as regularly as his brother. He asked me how I was. I told him I'd had better days, and explained the situation. His response was to change my life. He picked up his briefcase from the floor and put it on his lap.

'I don't know why I put this in my bag this morning,' he said, 'but here it is, I'd like you to have it. You should read it.' Jack handed me an 11-page pamphlet by Alan Watts entitled 'The art of seeing'. It had pale green covers printed in black, with the image of a fat, laughing Buddha on the front.

Over the next five days I read, reread and reread again the 11 pages of this pamphlet. It was as if Watts had entered where my heart and soul were housed, and rearranged the furniture. My excitement at discovering something so palpably true and understandable while described in a language that was straightforward, and without 'side', was wonderful to me.

In revisiting Watts in this, his centenary year, I have found much comfort in realizing just how valued he was by others. *You Tube* has been a revelation, finding a video made by Watts in 1970–71, just two or three years before his death, in which he speaks of the urgent need to address climate change (although, of course, he did not use this term), as preface to a lecture on the necessity of the self to recognize, and enjoin, its symbiotic nature with 'other'. This had long been Watts' major theme, to be found in all his books: that to recognize anything at all that is not illusory, one must allow in the reality that one is nothing if one is not everything. The video, which lasts approximately 12 minutes, has had over 150,000 views.¹

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Alan Watts was well respected in his lifetime, being associated with the Zen freaks and the Beat Generation and Allen Ginsberg and the Krishna people, as Albert W. Sadler, an influential author and scholar of Buddhism, Japanese culture and comparative religion, noted in a critique at the time. While this might sound a little dismissive, Sadler acknowledged that Watts and his friends went on to develop 'the market' of contemporary student interest in comparative religion and philosophy.

In an exchange of letters with Sadler, Watts writes of his brushes with drugs: 'having experimented with both mescaline and lysergic acid [I find] they may have some therapeutic value but, for me, they are simply nothing like a *satori*'. In this fascinating archive, which has only recently come to light, there are also letters from Joseph Campbell and Gary Snyder to Sadler on the subject of Alan Watts. Snyder admits to having 'the same complex feelings [as Sadler has] about that complex man, Alan Watts'.²

Five years after Watts died, in 1978, I had what I now call my 'watershed year'. I am quite certain that if Jack Percale had not given me Watts' pamphlet, my life would not have taken the turn it did, leading me eventually to these pages, and the profession of counselling and psychotherapy. I don't know if others can isolate a year in which their life took on new meaning in such a way, and with such force that they have never looked back. I certainly hope they can. It serves as a constant reference point, and helps enormously in staying present in the present which, after all, is what it is all about. Alan Watts' vision, and his perception of a reality masked by illusion, did this for me.

Being a bookseller, I started accumulating every book by Alan Watts I could lay my hands on. I even acquired two little pamphlets he had published when he was just 17 years old, in 1932. They were simply titled 'Zen Buddhism' and, I think, 'The History of Zen Buddhism'. They were bound in yellow wrappers, printed in black. Later books I acquired and devoured included *The Taboo of Knowing* and *Nature, Man and Woman*, two of my favourites.³ I had at least 20 or 30 of his books by the time I had finished.

Do I have them now? Am I not a bookseller? Of course I do not have them now – they, like Buddha, have been killed along the road. But for many years they sat proudly on my 'personal books' shelves, to be shared, reread and loaned to friends with similar interests.

In revisiting Watts for this article I have been struck by the visible physical changes he went through. These are available to see on the internet due to his early career as a lecturer on TV. It allows one to reflect that he was a man of his time, whatever time that was. He morphed from the straight guy giving what one can only describe as an 'Open University'-style lecture, the kind you might stumble across at four in the morning on TV, to the long-haired, bearded guru talking wistfully from a mountain top behind Sausalito, while preparing tea in the Japanese Tea Ceremony tradition. I fantasize that if he were alive today, he would be exactly as I would expect a 100-year-old man of wisdom to be – sparing of word but razor sharp with his perceptions.

It feels fitting when writing of the man to share some of his thoughts, so below I give some quotations from Watts which have helped me at different times. Some are from his lectures, some from his books: Self and other are as inseparable as back and front. Self is the basis of all being out of which we proceed ... as [do] leaves from the tree. No amount of searching will uncover the Self. To seek it is to thrust it away. If you try to give up your ego with your ego it will take you till the end of

time. We're trying to straighten out a wiggly world so no wonder we are in trouble. Thought is a good servant, but a bad master. No cause is separate from its effect, except for purposes of description in a dualistic language. And finally:

We have been trying to harness technology to the impossible game of having positive without negative, defying principles of that very electricity upon which technology so largely depends. This objective is as illusory as the ego that seeks it.

I could go on and on giving quotations from his writings and talks, but I just wish to offer a taster for those who have not encountered Watts before, in the hope that it might propel them into the world behind the world which is the world of Alan Watts.

And of course, like Jung, like any self-respecting realist, Watts experienced and acknowledged his dark side. In today's modern world, on the internet and elsewhere, there is no shortage of comment on the nature of Watts' death; that it was largely due to drink, that he was unfaithful to his wife, and so on. Personally I would have trouble trusting someone who did not own they had a dark side, a side they might, in certain circumstances, prefer to keep quiet and away from the public gaze. Even the Dalai Lama, in conversation with Michael Palin, admitted to having 'bowel movement problems' following returning home after a gruelling world tour. This kind of 'humanity' only emphasizes the 'human' aspect of the man.

Watts allegedly died remarking on how light the balloon he had been playing with appeared to be. I am happy with this image of his death, whether or not it is true. The integrity of the man is to be found in his dedication to seeking out truth, to bringing to the West, along with such luminaries as Christmas Humphries, the wisdom of the East. The brilliance of the man is that he was able to do this with humility, joy and remarkable authority. Reading him, listening to him, watching him on video, has made me think that the best way forward for all of us is to stand still and, in his words, 'shut up and lick our lollipop', or in other words – appreciate what we've got, which is 'NOW'.

Six years after discovering Alan Watts I wrote this little poem for my second daughter, which seems to resonate with my current conclusion.

Poppy on her 5th birthday

A small child
with deep blue eyes
looks out to sea.
Camouflaged
behind her ball
of ice-cream
all knowledge
required for life
is there
in that one lovely stare ...

Notes

1. See 'Alan Watts breaks down what's wrong with the world – Part 1' (1970), available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LXiSPpfM54 (accessed 30 August 2015).

2. *Between the covers*, Rare Books Catalogue 199, 2015: Counter Culture – Item 116.
3. See Watts (1958/1991) and Watts (1966/2009).

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Notes on contributor



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