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# 'You can tell a yogi by his laugh': reminiscences of Alan Watts' last summer

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In a long-distance race, you save your best effort for last. It seems that Alan Watts did the same, as he once told me that Taoism was his greatest love, and it became the subject of his last book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. This book remained, like his life, incomplete, or perhaps complete in its imperfection, like the beauty of a haiku poem that requires the mind of the reader to fill in the landscape. To explore and stimulate ideas for the book, Alan instituted a scholarship program for six students during that final summer of writing, and I was blessed to be a member of that group. We met at his wooden yurt-shaped library near Muir Woods five days a week for two months. This article is a personal record and poetic exploration of that idyllic summer and the context of his final attempt to express, or at least laugh with, the ineffable Tao.

**Keywords:** Alan Watts; Chinese; Esalen; poetry; Tai Chi; Taoism; Zen

## Beyond the box

During the summer of 1973 I joined Alan Watts in a waking dream, shared with several other students and a variety of brilliant and eccentric guests. We met every weekday in Druid Heights, a five-acre Bay Area Bohemia near Muir Woods, California, for meditation, Japanese Tea Ceremony, and to listen to Alan's mind-altering lectures about Taoism and life. It was difficult then, as it is now, to characterize those sessions, as they were neither entirely academic nor experiential. Alan's lectures, like his personality, defied categories. He not only thought and lived 'outside of the box', but encouraged others to do likewise, as he believed that intellectual boxes were the foundation of illusion. 'Oh, the word is not the thing; the word is not the thing. Hi ho the merry-o, the word is not the thing.' (He borrowed the refrain from his favorite linguist, Alfred Korzybski.) And this is, perhaps, the paradox that all mystics face: how to use words to reveal where words cannot go, the experience of silence from which all words emerge and which gives definition to them, like the empty space that allows one to see the figures in a painting. Alan Watts was a *Jnana Yogi*, one whose skillful use of language strips away assumptions and preconceptions, leaving No-Thing in its place.

Alan Watts called himself 'a philosophical entertainer, a coincidence of opposites, a wild card in the pack, a rascal'. Even among the beats and hippies of the 1960s, he was unconventional, for it was his belief that convention – religious, social, and linguistic – keeps one in bondage. At our first meeting in California, he guided me on

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a walk through his garden. Stopping near a patch of irises, poppies, and hyacinths, Alan began to speak to a butterfly, in what I first thought was Japanese, and soon realized was pseudo-Japanese nonsense syllables. Alan then explained to me, matter-of-factly, 'I asked the butterfly to alight on my hand, but he just refuses to do so!' At that point he exploded into one of his famous body-shaking, highly contagious belly laughs. Alan understood the deep connection between cosmic and comic, for both the philosopher and the humorist force one to question assumptions. If one can indeed, as Tibetans say, 'tell a yogi by his laugh', then Alan Watts was a great yogi.

One of Alan's favorite meditations was to talk his students into a state of spontaneous intoxication. 'Now imagine that you have just inhabited your body and this place, as though a visitor from another planet. You are not quite sure what these tentacle-like arms are, nor how to move your legs. This is your first time seeing these golden hills, breathing the air, and using your senses to explore the grasses and trees.' In a mood of playful abandon, we walked, stumbled, rolled in the grass, knocked our heads against trees, tickled our skin with eucalyptus leaves, and became enchanted by the sounds of the birds.

Alan's 'Mandala House', designed by architect and musician Bob Somers, was archetypal California, round and quirky, shaded by tall and fragrant eucalyptus trees through which one could catch a glimpse of distant golden hills. Early each morning as fog drifted in from the Pacific, Alan would emerge from his home in an elegant silk kimono and ring the great cylindrical metal gong that hung from the rafters. He had never been to China, but had created his own.

In the clear dawn I enter the ancient temple,
As early sunlight illuminates the great forest.
Along winding paths to a place of seclusion:
A Zen retreat, deep among flowering trees.
Mountain brightness gladdens the birds.
Pool shadows empty the mind.
And the symphony of nature all silenced
At sound of bell and gong.
—Ch'ang Chien, eighth-century Chinese poet

Just down the trail from Alan's home was a large wooden water tank, about 25 feet in diameter, that had been converted into a library: walls lined with bookshelves, a glass dome skylight, ringed by a redwood deck with a sweeping vista (see Figure 1). There was a Japanese *koto* on the floor on which Alan loved to improvise. 'It is tuned so you cannot make a mistake', he loved to remind his guests, so they might also pluck some strings. In one corner of the room was a low table and round black *zafu* (Zen cushion) on which Alan would sit during meditation and discussion. And it was also here that Alan wrote his last book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way.*

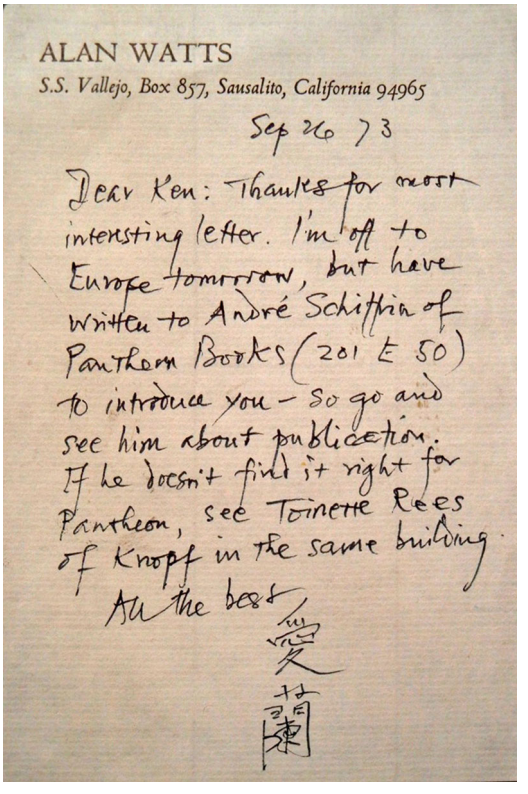
I am responsible for several of the Chinese translations in *Tao: The Watercourse Way* and contributed to various portions of the text. At the time of Alan's passing, I was one of the few who knew his plans for the unfinished final two chapters: one on Taoism and politics, examining themes of social justice and wise governance that are central to the *Tao Te Ching* (Lao Tzu's fourth-century BCE classic of Taoism), and a final chapter on Taoism and Chinese poetry. The latter would include translations of ancient Chinese poetry, drawn exclusively from my manuscript *Wind-*

Figure 1. Alan's library in Muir Woods (photo by the author, 1976).

*Flow: The Art of Chinese Poetry.* I had shown Alan the draft of *Wind-Flow* at the beginning of the summer, and he hoped that our two works would be published simultaneously. I was honored when Alan recommended me to both his book agent, John Brockman (see Figure 2), and to Lorraine Ellis Harr (1912–2006), editor of *Dragonfly: A Quarterly of Haiku*. *Dragonfly* published my first articles and thus launched my literary career.

One can see Alan's love of the Chinese language, culture, and calligraphy – beautifully added to *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Al Chung-liang Huang – throughout the book, though Alan was not, and would never claim to be, a Sinologist. He confided that his Chinese was largely 'self-taught', though he learned a great deal from colleagues at the American Academy of Asian Studies (which he co-founded in 1950), from friends such as Gary Snyder, and dictionaries, especially his favorite, the Arthur Rose-Innes 1944 publication of *Chinese and Japanese Characters.* I gave Alan a gift of the *Ci hai* (Ocean of Words), the standard academic dictionary of classical Chinese. To my surprise he had never heard of the text, though he quickly and happily learned to use it as he continued his work on the book.

It is interesting to note that throughout the writing of *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, Alan had Joseph Needham's second volume of *Science and Civilisation in China* close by. He considered it his academic bible, and once offered me this insight: 'Needham is great because he is an orchestra leader. Rather than trying to do everything himself, he gathers and organizes information from a wide range of excellent scholars'. Alan, in spite of his extraordinary originality, often did the same. And so Needham joined the ranks of other academic models or sources of inspiration, mentioned frequently


ALAN WATTS
S.S. Vallejo, Box 857, Sausalito, California 94965

Sep 26 73

Dear Ken: Thanks for most
interesting letter. I'm off to
Europe tomorrow, but have
written to André Schiffrin of
Pantheon Books (201 E 50)
to introduce you – so go and
see him about publication.
If he doesn't find it right for
Pantheon, see Toinette Rees
of Knopf in the same building.
All the best

愛
蘭

Figure 2. Letter from Watts to KC, September 1973. Copyright © 1973 by Alan Watts. Used by permission of Joan Watts and Anne Watts.
*Perhaps the last letter written by Alan Watts before his European tour and subsequent passing in November of 1973. It includes Alan's beautiful Chinese signature, Ai Lan, which is not only a Chinese phonetic translation of his name, but which carries the beautiful meaning 'Loves (Ai) Orchids (*Lan)'.

by Alan during that last summer: D. T. Suzuki, Lin Yutang (especially his *The Importance of Living*), Alfred North Whitehead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor Schwenk, and Lancelot Law Whyte. The latter two are perhaps not as well known today.

Schwenk's *Sensitive Chaos* is a book of photos and text that explores archetypal patterns of flow in meandering streams, smoke, tree rings, clouds, bones, and throughout nature. Alan's lectures, writings, and films (particularly the Alan Watts films produced by Elda Harley such as *Flow of Zen*) frequently drew on these themes, which Alan saw as analogous to the Chinese term *li*, the fundamental 'patterns' or 'principles' discovered in nature. Lancelot Law Whyte, Scottish engineer, may have worked with Albert Einstein on his Unified Field Theory and believed in a unified human being, in which the intellect worked in harmony with all other human faculties. One can see the similarity to Alan's philosophy when Whyte writes,'Thought is born of failure. Only when the human organism fails to achieve an adequate response to its situation is there material for the processes of thought, and the greater the failure the more searching they become' (Whyte, 1948, p. 1).

**Cloud hidden**

The spring 1973 newsletter of the Alan Watts Society for Comparative Philosophy announced the start of a summer scholarship program. The plan was to select five or six students each year to whom Alan would offer daily lectures on a particular subject or theme. Each student would be responsible for his or her own transportation and lodging, but there would be no fee for the program. The scholarship also included the option of being Alan's guest at his Esalen Institute and Bay Area workshops. The program would launch in the summer of 1973 – which turned out to be Alan's last, with lectures on Taoism matching topics he was writing about in a new book. (He planned to offer a similar program focusing on Vedanta in 1974.) Alan hoped that at least one of the students would have knowledge of classical Chinese and could assist in locating or translating original passages from Taoist writings, particularly the *Chuang Tzu* (the name of a book and a person, third century BCE). Alan described Chuang Tzu, one of the founders of Taoist philosophy, as 'the greatest philosopher of all time'. Like Alan, Chuang Tzu used humor to tease people out of intellectual ruts. In many ways, they were alike.

I applied to the program. I knew it was presumptuous and probably impossible for me to 'assist' the great Alan Watts, but then again, since I was 20 years old I probably thought I could do absolutely anything! In my cover letter, I included my qualifications: I had already studied several years of both modern and classical Chinese, including training with an outstanding scholar of the Chuang Tzu, Dr Bernard Solomon of Queens College, New York City. I was familiar with Alan's writings, having first learned about him after reading his introduction to D. T. Suzuki's *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. I had first met Alan in 1968 when I took part in a three-day seminar at Bucks County Seminar House in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, followed by attendance at yearly lectures or workshops. But I wrote that my chief qualification was that I was one of four founding members of a club of young Buddhists (ages 18–22) devoted to humor, in which all members were required to read *Don Quixote* and *The Pickwick Papers*. We began our meetings by smoking cigars and then attempting to extinguish them by throwing them across a room into cups of espresso coffee. Yes, all true. I believe it was my membership in this esoteric mis-organization that clinched it.

To my delight, Alan replied with a personal note, 'You sound like what I am looking for' (see Figure 3). We spoke on the phone, and he asked me to meet him for an interview backstage at Carnegie Hall, before an upcoming lecture. Alan was personable, warm, and unpretentious. Frankly, more than 40 years later, I can't recollect the content of our conversation, only the excitement at hearing, 'You are in!' (I found out later that I was one of more than 2000 applicants.) I do remember asking him minutes before leaving to take my seat in the sold-out concert hall, 'What will you be speaking about?' Alan replied:

> I haven't the slightest idea. If I felt it necessary to read from lecture notes, I would rather say 'Please read my book' and then leave the stage. I never prepare for these events because, after all, they are here to meet me. A rehearsed script does not allow interaction with the audience and is boring to them and to me!

Alan's words have served me well over the years, as I often lecture to large groups and have *never* delivered a prepared speech, a fact that is often disconcerting to prestigious institutional sponsors who generally do not like surprises!

ALAN WATTS
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4/7/73

Dear Kenny Cohen:

I am very interested in your letter.
Please call me in New York City
between April 10th and 12th at
628-5296, or leave message with
Donna Silverburg at Pantheon Books,
751-2600. I would like to discuss
things with you.

You sound like what I am looking for!

Best wishes,

Alan Watts.

Figure 3. Letter from Watts to KC 4/7/73. Copyright © 1973 by Alan Watts. Used by permission of Joan Watts and Anne Watts.
*This is Alan's answer to my scholarship application.*

In preparation for the summer program, I rented a room in a run-down hotel on Geary Street in San Francisco. Each day I took the public bus to Mill Valley, then hitchhiked to the top of the mountain and walked down the foggy back slope, finally hiking an additional mile along an unmarked dirt road through a forested canopy of live oak, madrone, eucalyptus, and cedar. It was a kind of preparation and pilgrimage. Alan's home was reclusive, yet open to any that found the way. 'I work on an old Chinese principle,' he told me, 'if you can get here, you're welcome to it.'

> Under the pine tree I questioned your disciple,
> He said, 'The Master is off gathering herbs.
> He's somewhere in these mountains,
> Cloud hidden, in a place beyond knowledge.'
> —Chia Tao, 779–843

And what a cast of characters found their way! The scholarship students were 'Douglas Bayley (Sausalito, garden expert), Ken Cohen (New York, Tai Chi teacher), Mark Goldenhersh (San Francisco, librarian), James Hayes (London, England, Zen student), John Stark (Los Angeles, student), Carol Sturcey (New York City, gardener)' (Society for Comparative Philosophy (SCP) Bulletin,

Autumn 1973). Among these, I have maintained contact with John Stark, now a professor of philosophy and religion from Georgia. In addition, there were frequent guests, including Alan's neighbor and friend – poet, visionary, and lesbian/gay rights activist Elsa Gidlow (1898–1986); Margo St. James (b. 1937), a pioneer feminist who organized a union for prostitutes; and anthropologist Maud Oakes (1903–1990), known for her writings about the Navajo. Others who joined us for a day to listen and share included the great scholar of Madhyamika Buddhism, Frederick Streng (1933–1993); Tai Chi Master and Dancer Al Huang; a Korean Zen master and calligrapher (he must have been nameless as the Dao as no one seems to remember his name, though his 24-inch writing brush was unforgettable); Zen priest (now Roshi) Reb Anderson; and Hiroyuki Aoki (b. 1936), founder of the Japanese martial art Shintaido.

The days were long, beginning with about 20 minutes of *zazen* (quiet sitting) during which Alan advised us to listen to the sounds, whether of the forest or of his own voice, without attaching image or meaning. 'Listen as though listening to the sound of flowing water. It doesn't *mean* anything; it doesn't refer to anything beyond itself. Just let the sound play upon your ears.' Often, the silence was broken by the cry of Alan's favorite bird, which he named 'Mickpeehyou' because of the sound it made. I composed a haiku in its honor:

'Mickpeehyou, mickpeehyou'
The cry of an unseen bird
Deepens the forest.

If Alan belonged to a school of Zen Buddhism it was, he readily admitted, the Bankei School. Japanese Zen master Bankei Yotaku (1622–1693) preached 'The Unborn Buddha Mind', a state of realization that arose naturally and spontaneously – 'unborn' – not produced by deliberate effort such as reading *sutras* (religious texts) or even sitting in meditation. One sits as an expression of who one is, the way a bird sings in the morning, not in order to become something. After all, if all beings inherently have Buddha Nature, what is there to seek?

After some 20 minutes of sitting, Alan sometimes performed his own version of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. He had learned basic elements of it from his friends, Japanese artist Saburo Hasegawa and Tea Master Milly Johnstone. Though the ritual choreography may have been lacking, the whisked tea was always delicious. The Taoism lectures started at about 10 in the morning, a brief lunch break, then more discussion until the late afternoon. At the end of each day, I invited the group to join me for Tai Chi instruction and practice on the deck. Alan loved to watch, but when questioned about participation, he laughed, 'I'm basically a lazy intellectual'. After these sessions, when the other students had left for the day, I would sometimes remain to discuss nuances of *Wen Yan* (classical Chinese) or to translate texts.

Alan's 'lazy intellectual' was a bit of Chinese style self-deprecation. Anyone with such a prodigious output and work schedule can't exactly be described as 'lazy'. And Alan did pride himself on one form of exercise that he enjoyed whenever possible: dancing or, at least, spontaneous movement to music. I personally participated in a particularly memorable example of this. During the last evening of an Esalen Institute workshop, just as the approximately 50 students were finishing dinner, Alan surprised

the entire group with several cases of beer, purchased at his own expense. As the festivities continued, Alan inquired, 'Ken, do you have your wooden Tai Chi sword with you?' I said, 'I can get it easily. It's in my room, just across the meadow'. 'Great', Alan replied, and I ran, not sure what he had in mind.

When I returned, at Alan's request the guests and staff had arranged all of the tables in the dining room in a giant circle. Alan, dressed as always in a kimono, stood on top of one of the tables and asked me to join him. Then, 'Ken, raise your sword on high'. I raised my sword overhead, at which point Alan began singing in a booming voice, 'Onward Christian Soldiers!', made all the more grand by his King's English. (Today, by sound and appearance, he would be mistaken for Gandalf, from the *Lord of the Rings* movie.) As he and I sang, we marched on the circle of tabletops. With a lifting motion of his hands, Alan motioned for the workshop participants to join us, and soon we are all stomping and singing: a wild, joyous, and nonsensical parade led by the Zen Master and his admiring young student.

Looking back now, with the benefit of time, reflection, and the various works that have been written about him, I realize that Alan probably saw his relationship with me as parallel to his relationship with his first Buddhist mentor, Christmas Humphreys. Alan once wrote about his love for Christmas who had 'given me my life'. Alan did the same for me. During our first encounter, in 1968, I undoubtedly 'stunk of Buddhism', a teenaged fanatic who chanted Pali sutras every day and was determined to become a monk in Thailand. Alan advised me to 'stay away from those scrawny Buddhist monks' and, instead, practice meditation at the Zen Studies Society in Manhattan. He also directed me toward the book that inspired what became my life-long fascination with the Chinese language. And when in that fateful first meeting I expressed my disdain of conventional education and fear of restrictive institutions, Alan looked at me piercingly: 'Since you know what you need to do and have talent, you should just do it. The hell with the universities'. And thus I gained the confidence to design my own education, braving the financial and social challenges that followed, as well as the dismay of my parents. When I read about Alan's rejection of an Oxford education in Monica Furlong's biography, I felt I was reading a chapter in my own story.

**This dewdrop world**

At the end of the summer, Alan invited me to camp near the library for a week, and then to spend another week as his guest on his houseboat, the *S.S. Vallejo*, an old ferryboat docked in Sausalito harbor. Before I left California, Alan hosted a going-away party on the boat in my honor. What a joy it was to cook together for all the guests, an Indian feast of curries, pakora, and chapatis. After dinner, I was amused to see Alan's eyes chasing an attractive 30-year-old woman. At one point, as she was walking nearby, he motioned her over. Placing his hands fully on her buttocks, he said mischievously, 'Some people measure a person through their eyes. I measure them through their bottoms. I am a bottomologist, you see'. Instead of a slap, she responded with a playful smile and seductive sway of her hips. The mood took a somber turn when, later that evening, Alan was engaged in one of his favorite activities: blowing smoke from a briarwood pipe through a children's soap bubble maker. Suddenly he poked a bubble and as the enclosed smoke dispersed, he said,

with uncharacteristic solemnity, 'Life is like a bubble, poof and it's gone'. I had a premonition that I would not see Alan again. According to the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*, 'Life is like a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, a dew drop, a flash of lightning'.

I gave Alan as a parting gift a bag of peanuts (which he always loved) and a poem by the Chinese poet Tu Fu (712–770) that I had translated in his honor:

We have met rarely in this life,
Journeying like two distant stars.
What sort of night shall this be,
Together, now, in the candlelight?
Does the strength of youth ever last?
The hair at our temples has already greyed,
And inquiring after old friends, half are gone –
Cries of sorrow burn in our hearts.
Who would guess that it would be 20 years
Before I would again come to visit?
When we parted, years ago, you had not yet married,
And now, quite suddenly, this line of boys and girls.
They are pleased to honor their father's friend,
Asking from where I have journeyed.
Before all questions were answered
Your children brought out the wine.
In the night rain we picked spring chives,
And steamed them with rice and millet.

You say it is getting harder and harder to meet,
So we raise our goblets, one cup becomes ten;
Ten cups and we're still not drunk –
I thank you for the depth of these old affections.
Tomorrow, separated by mountains and peaks,
We will again be lost in the boundless affairs of the world.

Alan Watts seemed always prepared for death. He echoed the *Bhagavad Gita* when he said, 'You never die because you were never born; you've just forgotten who you are!' But in his case, this realization did not lead to a life of resigned acceptance but rather a *carpe diem* savoring of life's precious moments. 'I want to go out with a bang and not a whimper', he proclaimed. He knew he had a heart condition; yet he continued indulging in cigars and alcohol. When his friend, Al Huang, cautioned him about his health, Alan replied, 'Well, if I die and you miss me, that's your problem, isn't it!' At which point Alan exploded in one of his famous belly laughs. (Alan made no effort to hide his vices behind a mask of holiness. Yet, I wished then, and now, that Alan had paid better attention to his health, but perhaps I am just being selfish. It was his choice.)

A few months after that going-away party, Alan returned exhausted from a European lecture tour. He died in his sleep, probably from a heart attack. Alan's wife, 'Jano', with whom I had developed a friendship, called me that day with the news. She also announced his passing in a beautiful card sent to Alan's many friends and

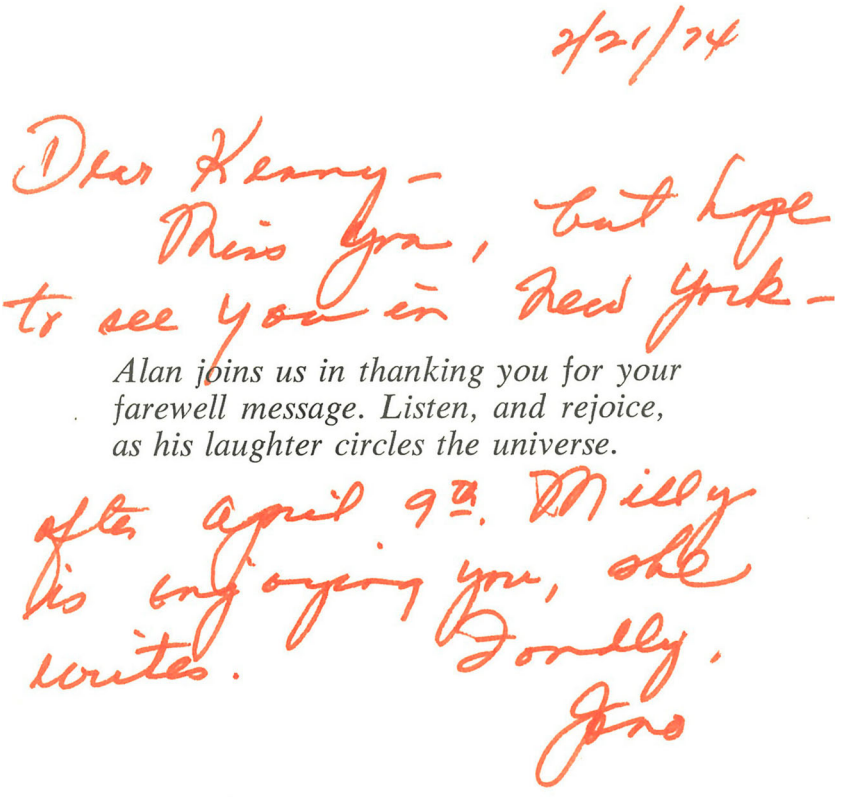


Figure 4. Letter from Jano to KC 1974. Copyright © 1974 by Mary Jane Watts. Used by permission of Joan Watts and Anne Watts.
*This is the announcement of Alan's passing, with a personal note from Jano, Alan's wife.* 'Milly' refers to my Japanese Tea Ceremony teacher, *Milly Johnstone, introduced to me by Alan.*

associates (see Figure 4). It was illustrated with Alan's whimsical rendition of the *enso*, a black-ink circle drawn with a Chinese brush, symbol of both wisdom and the circle of life.

Alan's ashes were divided in three portions. Some were buried near his library, with a Shiva-lingam-shaped wooden *stupa* marking the spot (see Figure 5). Some were buried at Green Gulch Zen Center, on a hill facing the sea, under a great rock, naturally shaped like a pair of hands in *gassho*, prayer gesture. And the rest of his ashes disappeared or 'were stolen', as his family informed me – I like to think by a laughing Taoist Immortal.

Seven years after his passing, I visited the place where I had spent that beautiful summer. Just as Alan's face came to mind, I saw cutting through morning fog near the library a large, dark-brown hawk, coincidentally the same color as one of Alan's favorite kimonos. It wheeled over my head, circled higher and higher, and disappeared. This hawk seemed to embody Alan's vast vision of life, his high spirit, and keen perception. It was a fitting goodbye from the spirit of my great friend.

Figure 5. The stupa marking Alan's ashes (photo by the author, 1976).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Note

Poetry translations in this article are by the author unless otherwise noted. Chinese romanization is in the Wade–Giles system, commonly used by Alan Watts.

## Notes on contributor

Kenneth S. Cohen MA is a world-renowned Taoist scholar/practitioner. Winner of the lifetime achievement award in energy medicine, he taught Qigong as Body-Centered Psychotherapy at the Colorado Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, Union Institute, and other universities. Ken is the author of *The Way of Qigong* and more than 250 journal articles.

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