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Alan Watts and the Therapeutic Process

The late Alan Watts, the British-born American philosopher spent most of his life with his finger on the pulse of Western psychology. Although he was well known for his interpretation of Eastern philosophy in general and Zen Buddhism in particular, he played an important part in helping to bring about changes in the psychological view of man.

He was amongst the first to recognise the important contribution of oriental thought in the realm of western psychology. Although Alan Watts achieved great popularity (some would say notoriety) his influence on the changing face of the therapeutic process has been little understood, here in the land of his birth.

But what is meant by the term "therapeutic process"? The word "therapeutic" implies that a state of health is the desirable condition of all human beings. The characteristics that make a person (definably) healthy varies from culture to culture, and from century to century. Today's definition includes: the humanistic values of awareness of individuals in their own right; the development of open and trusting relationships between people; and the freedom to express (to quote Self and Society) ". . .the excitement, wonder and innate loving energy of human beings as human beings." Any system of psychological and emotional development which helps to create these conditions can be said to be part of the therapeutic process - the on-going awareness of life.

Awareness is the fundamental ground which supports the multitude of techniques which aim at making life more meaningful and rich. The oriental techniques of yoga and meditation have contributed a tremendous amount by helping people become more aware of themselves and the world around them. Alan Watts was instrumental in helping to create the conditions which enabled the East and West to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

Although he wrote many books about various aspects of oriental thought, Alan Watts contributed something singularly important to the intellectual life of mankind. It was his own unique message - explored and described from a variety of view points, and it was this unique message that has been misunderstood and mis-represented. In the psychological milieu it has been misunderstood because it is essentially a way of seeing through the intellectualising of life by using the intellect.

Today the therapeutic process is mainly involved with experiencing life rather than just talking about it, and so any mention of an intellectual approach

is met with some scepticism. It is so easy to become caught in the net of words, and words can prevent or even postpone actual experience of the **now**. But Alan Watts had a rare gift of communication - he could play with words, fully aware that they were only symbols and had a reality only as words. It was this gift that became his therapeutic skill.

In his book "Psychotherapy, East and West" Watts tried to show that what he calls the eastern ways of liberation are closely allied to the western practice of psychotherapy because both systems seek to free the individual from psychological and social conditioning. By freeing oneself from all conditioning a true state of openness and trust can arise and develop. However, the traditional practices of psychotherapy seem to fall short of this ideal because they appear to aim not for liberation (freedom from conditioning) but **adjustment** to the existing conditions. Is adjustment to society our greatest therapeutic goal?

It has been argued that there is a real danger in the approach of those methods which advocate liberation. It has been assumed that by freeing oneself from all psychological and social conditioning there would be no need to accept any responsibility for one's actions. This, of course, implies that conditioning is necessary for maintaining the stability of society.

But here arises another misunderstanding. Liberation is not the same thing as **Licence**. If a person considers himself liberated after following some technique of awareness (eastern or western) and then acts according to his every whim without any sense of responsibility, he can be said to have only succeeded in substituting one form of conditioning for another. Now he is conditioned by his unfulfilled desires to do all the things he was not permitted to do before. Thus he has only succeeded in ridding himself of guilt but in return has acquired the condition of irresponsibility!

What, then, is this state of liberation and how does it come about? It is quite obvious to most of us that the world around us is imperfect and incomplete. Some people may feel that the imperfection and incompleteness lies not in the world, but within man himself, and so they seek the answer to the imperfection in themselves. This state of imperfection (perhaps the Buddhist **Dukkha**) within oneself gives rise to the search for some way of overcoming that imperfection or incompleteness, and thus is born the necessity of developing numerous ways to complete that which is incomplete, to perfect that which is imperfect.

Humanistic psychology brings together many methods of dealing with imperfections within ourselves. The basic assumption underlying psychological methods of liberation is that by becoming liberated we become whole and are thus able to relate to others in an open and fulfilling way, becoming (to use the dreadful jargon) an authentic human being.

The basic assumption underlying the spiritual methods of liberation is that not only does man become psychologically whole, he becomes holy. In the past these two approaches have been seen as parallel lines of development,

though psychological completeness has been given a lesser importance.

It is at this point that Alan Watts makes his most important contribution to the therapeutic process. He was able to see that the terms psychological and spiritual liberation were not different in kind but only in emphasis. He saw that there was a spiritual conditioning too, in which a person could become trapped in a kind of spiritual egotism in which a spiritual game of onepmanship could develop - an attitude of "I-am-holier-than-thou".

By pushing these states to their full conclusion, whether the method of liberation be psychological or spiritual, it is possible to experience that final "flip", that "turning about in the seat of consciousness", where all division between self and other, dissolves, revealing the foundation of our selfishness for what it really is - an illusion. To do this, psychologically, Alan Watts maintains that we can try any therapy we like and, provided we take it right to its limit, we will discover this experience for ourselves.

This view may seem to undermine the whole therapeutic process, but this is not actually the case. It is not denying that real progress can be made by individuals who find it hard to function in society. There is a plentiful supply of well documented cases in which people have enjoyed a fuller and richer life. But is this liberation or is it adjustment?

The main criticism which has so often been aimed at Alan Watts is that his approach to life is merely intellectual. It might be admitted that he was indeed a man of shrewd and brilliant insight, but he gives no practical advice. He gives no instructions on what can be done to bring about the state of liberation that he describes. In other words we may understand what he is saying but we do not feel it.

This criticism arises because of a fundamental misunderstanding about human experience. The intellect is not a water-tight compartment which is isolated from the rest of the organism. Alan Watts is trying to make the point that the **whole** person is intelligent and that what is understood by the part is understood by the whole. And so, it is not without some truth that he doubts whether we do understand what he is saying if we do not feel it.

The message of Alan Watts is really very obvious and it is when we attend to the obvious that we learn the deepest secrets. He has summarised his message in a passage from a book which he wrote at the age of twenty-two and if we can really understand what he is saying then we have the key to a full and happy life.

"We shall study every philosophy, search through all the scriptures, consult every teacher and practice all spiritual exercises until our minds are swollen with the whole wisdom of the world. But in the end we shall return to the surprising fact that we walk, eat, sleep, feel and breathe, that whether we are deep in thought or idly passing the time of day, we are alive. And when we can

know just that to be the supreme experience of religion we shall know the final secret and join in the laughter of the gods. For the gods are laughing at themselves."

This passage applies equally to all forms of awareness training, and when the methods are forgotten the reality emerges.

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