

The Complete Alan Watts

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In the last issue of *EB*, I offered a biographical sketch of the late Alan Watts, a somewhat personal memoir of what I called his vintage years, the years from 1947, when he published *Behold the Spirit* at the age of 32, through his forty-first and forty-second years, when he published *The Way of Zen* (1956) and *Man, Nature and Woman* (1957). Those ten years or so were crucial for him. He held a clerical post for five years, from 1945 to 1950, and an academic post for another five years, from 1951 to 1956; he served as priest, then professor, in what seem to have been the only two occasions on which he held what the world recognizes as "steady work." And on both occasions he conceived of his vocation in rather unconventional terms. First he served as unorthodox priest to an academic community; then he became a teacher and director of studies at a very unconventional academy, where all the faculty were engaged, whether they knew it or not, in a quasi-priestly activity. Twice in his career he took on professional status, yet each time he contrived to remain on the periphery of his profession; and both endeavors he came, in the end, to regard as failures. And yet out of the very tension between institutional conventions and his free spirit came his best work.

To know why Watts always stayed on the periphery in whatever he did, we must know more about the origins of that free spirit of his. We must go from a narrow biographical focus to a wider focus. We must go beyond the vintage Watts to the complete Alan Watts. That free spirit of Watts' was born almost as soon as he was. It was born, or rather discovered, set free, in the acre of land behind his father's house in Chislehurst, whose boundary was marked by an immense sycamore tree ninety feet high (he calls it the axletree of the world, in his autobiography¹). Beyond that tree were boundless fields "with grasses,

* All notes refer to Alan Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography, 1915-1965*, published by Pantheon, New York, 1972.

¹ p.15.

sorrel, and flowering weeds so well above my head that I could get lost in this sunny herbaceous forest with butterflies floating above."² It was his boyhood paradise. Just across the railroad tracks was "an almost tropical swamp" with a tiny stream he and his childhood companions could follow "through two miles of thickets, mostly young hazels, elm, and ash, over ground twinkling with wild primroses and celandine and blossoming . . . with pagodalike layers of tree fungus, with toadstools . . ."³

His paradise was a place filled with mystery, mystery that rose up out of the wooded groves and swamps and invaded the worlds of home and parlor. He writes nostalgically of the drawing room of his parents' home, a "place of magic and fascination," notable for its Edwardian Oriental decor. The fireplace was flanked by two large Chinese vases, and over it was hung a Japanese woven picture of a teahouse and a lake, in the August moon. There was an upright piano, for singing Gilbert and Sullivan; a Korean vase; a round brass table from India, with mandala design. It was a special room, reserved only for special occasions. It was the English counterpart of the Japanese *zashiki*, and the boyish Alan Watts was the *zashiki-bokko*. It was here that Alan's father first read him tales of the mysterious East, seen through the eyes of the robust Rudyard Kipling.⁴

He was raised by four nannies, one of whom was unpleasant and English, and told him Bible stories. The other three, one Dutch and two Danish, told him fairy tales, and stirred his unconscious awareness of an archaic European culture that considerably pre-dates the coming of sober Christianity—an ancient culture of which he had premonitions from his mother, with her uncommonly mystical and magical reverence for nature. He wrote, toward the end of his life: "I carry over from childhood the vague but persistent impression of being exposed to hints of an archaic and underground culture whose values were lost to the Protestant religion and the industrial bourgeoisie . . . I seem to have been in touch with lingering links to a world . . . that was still understood among birds, trees, and flowers and was known—just a little—to my mother..."⁵

Here we have clues to what seems to me the most persistent single theme of his life: the theme of Paradise. He embarked upon life from the comforts and safety and joy of his family home and the woods and streams of a cozy town in the English countryside. They were his Garden of Eden, from which he was

² p. 15.

³ p. 16.

⁴ pp. 24-5.

⁵ p. 32.

expelled abruptly. The theme of Paradise becomes the theme of Paradise Lost, and eventually Paradise Regained.

The story of his quest for the lost paradise, and its rediscovery, has two chapters, one of which has to do with his encounter with Buddhism and the teachings of Daisetz Suzuki, and the other with his move across the Atlantic and then across the American continent, to the edge of the West, California, where he finally settled in to end his days. In 1947, and again in 1951, he passed through Los Angeles, and found it "bright with flowers."⁶ A hidden waterfall at Big Sur reminded him of "hearing a fall that I could not see, somewhere off in the woods," when he was a child, strolling at twilight through the countryside in Sussex.⁷ In 1953 he moved to Mill Valley, and lived there, and on a houseboat in nearby Sausalito, until his death in 1973; it is, he explained, "the nearest thing in the United States to a fishing village on the Italian Riviera."⁸ An Englishman, it must be remembered, can be expected to find his Paradise Regained in some warm and sunny seaside resort, if not actually on the Italian coast, at least on some coast that reminds him of the Mediterranean. He found that area north of San Francisco consistently "exotic, romantic, and exciting."⁹

As for Suzuki and Buddhism and his quest for the lost paradise, we need first to know more about his expulsion from his boyhood paradise. It came in his seventh year. His mother was sickly, and father was engaged in the world of commerce, and had to be away from home a good bit; and so when young Alan outgrew his nannies, he was packed off to boarding school. He later summed up his experience with supreme terseness: "I felt myself given over to the care of maniacal bullies."¹⁰ He disliked the emphasis on competitive sports, and detested cricket, which he calls "the ultimately boring game."¹¹ In part his dislike was a consequence of a visual problem: he lacked binocular vision, and could not judge the distance of the approaching ball. All who talked with him will I am sure recall that curious subconscious uneasiness that comes of not quite knowing which eye to look at. Visual difficulties, in the West at least, seem to go with an ear for mysticism. Aldous Huxley had great difficulties with his eyes, and wrote a fascinating little book on *The Art of Seeing*, quickly pointing up the connection between ordinary vision, visionary experiences, and mystical experience. Watts' troubles were not nearly so severe as Huxley's however; thus while Huxley's mysticism was colored by a certain preoccupation with the

⁶ p. 235.

⁷ pp. 243-4.

⁸ p. 254.

⁹ p. 258.

¹⁰ p. 91.

¹¹ p. 14.

physiological, Watts' was characterized by a special mental agility. This too he seems to have learned in boarding schools, where fear of sadistic punishment made him an artful dodger, a youthful master of "sheer guile and skulduggery."¹² He also came to see intellectuality as "a form of judo, of overcoming the game by its own method."¹³

All of this should serve to explain why he carefully avoided what he once called "square Zen": "most Zen monasteries in Japan," he wrote, "are principally boarding schools for the sons of priests, and . . . all church schools, whether Buddhist, Catholic, or Protestant, are run on the same lines: with drill and big stick."¹⁴ In Anglican boarding schools, he was taught "militarism and regimented music." Academic subjects included arithmetic (which he calls "preliminary accounting"), algebra (which he calls "preliminary banking"), and geometry ("preliminary surveying").¹⁵ His critique of British methods of education becomes sharpest when he records why he never learned to read music, or to play a musical instrument. His teacher "would balance a rubber eraser on each hand to be sure that you learned 'correct posture,' and hit your fingers with a pencil if you played a wrong note." He would have preferred to learn to play by ear, he says, and began to suspect "that there is something basically wrong with Western musical notation, and with the whole idea of playing music by reading from marks on paper . . ."¹⁶ Clearly he was ready to break out of the provincial confines of British education and culture, and discover the easy flow of Asian music. His parting shot was: ". . . in these schools we learned nothing, except the English language."¹⁷ Perhaps he would not agree, but it needs to be said: he learned it well, and it was no slight accomplishment. Shunning more conventional skills, he developed the one skill that kept him from the routine and dull, and allowed him his independence and integrity, which he prized above all else.

After seven years of this sort of mis-education, he found himself approaching manhood, and in need of exemplars whom he could admire and pattern himself after. His school masters, those maniacal bullies, would not do. And so his first model became the reprobate brother-in-law of the headmaster: a man who, in retrospect, sounds uncannily like Alan Watts himself. All his special mannerisms, his eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, seem to have come from this man. Francis Croshaw was first of all an inveterate player of imagination games. At breakfast,

¹² p. 91.¹³ p. 36.¹⁴ p. 120.¹⁵ p. 43.¹⁶ pp. 89-90.¹⁷ p. 91.

he would designate each boiled egg with a personal name (Transom, Sondom, Paradiddle), and invite each child to choose his egg by name.¹⁸ His wife was known to all as Pom (Poor Old Mother). He supplied Watts, then fourteen, with plenty of the stubby dark Burmese stogies he himself was fond of—fore-runners no doubt of the small cigars Watts fumigated our seminar rooms with, some thirty years later. Croshaw went about in a “decrepit Moorish dressing gown,” and occasionally disappeared from his home on a sudden impulse to visit Wales.¹⁹ He was a raffish and whimsical man, guided by impulse and instinct: “a vague and wealthy man of uncertain behavior.”²⁰ He was also a lover of books, and his enormous private library opened new worlds for young Watts. The lad had come upon a copy of Lafcadio Hearn’s *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* in a nearby bookshop, and bought it, hoping for some good ghost stories. Instead, he found Japanese ghosts more amiable than hair-raising. But he was captivated by Hearn’s explanation of the aesthetics of the traditional Japanese house and garden, and went on to read Hearn’s *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* and Edmond Holmes’ *The Creed of Buddha*, lent by the kindly rogue and mentor, along with a short pamphlet on Buddhism by Christmas Humphreys.²¹ Young Watts devoured these, wrote to the Buddhist Lodge in London and quickly joined their society. Before long he went to meet Humphreys himself, who after Croshaw’s sudden death, became Watts’ second mentor. Still only a lad of fourteen, Alan Watts publicly declared himself a Buddhist. His headmaster congratulated him on his encouraging interest in religion, and promptly appointed him the school’s delegate to a church conference presided over by William Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury.²² The response was characteristically Anglican, and characteristically English. Young Watts was flattered by the invitation, and awed by the presence of William Temple. Here is the seed of Watts’ vintage dream of somehow wedding Buddhist metaphysic to Anglican tradition.

Watts was of course being groomed for a varsity career at Oxford. His father’s means would not allow him to enter without scholarship aid,²³ for which he had to take a special examination. His cocky free spirit may have shown itself on that examination; he recalls simply that he was writing in the style of Nietzsche.²⁴ His failure may have been accidental: a strategic miscalculation. Or there may have been an element of intent in it. He may instinctively have known to avoid

¹⁸ p. 69.¹⁹ p. 70.²⁰ p. 70.²¹ pp. 71, 73.²² p. 82.²³ p. 106.²⁴ p. 102.

the monotonies and conventions of academia, or else risk being untrue to himself, his emergent identity. At the very least, his *daemon* nudged his elbow as he wrote: a *daemon* wearing a tattered old dressing gown, and puffing on a Burmese stogie.

Released from the bondage of what the Upanishads call "lower knowledge," Alan Watts was now completely free to pursue the higher knowledge of *jnana*. For make no mistake about it: his goal was experiential knowledge, the knowledge in which duality vanishes, and the knower does not stand apart from the known. When he was still seventeen, with thoughts of yoga and *zazen* and *satipattbana* buzzing about in his head, he stayed up long hours of the night in an ancient room in Canterbury school "trying desperately to work out this problem: What is *the experience* which these Oriental masters are talking about? The different ideas of it which I had in mind seemed to be approaching me like little dogs wanting to be petted, and suddenly I shouted at all of them to go away. I annihilated and bawled out every theory and concept of what should be my properly spiritual state of mind, or of what should be meant by *me*. And instantly my weight vanished. I owned nothing. All hang-ups disappeared. I walked on air. . . ."25

When Watts was fifteen, Christmas Humphreys introduced him to the writings of Daisetz Suzuki; when he was twenty-one, Humphreys introduced him to Suzuki the man. By that time Alan Watts had taken over the editorship of the journal of the Buddhist Lodge, and Dr. Suzuki had come to London for the World Congress of Faiths, in 1936. What Watts found most striking about Suzuki was the apparent ease with which he combined deep learning with personal simplicity. He recalls watching him playing with a kitten during the meetings at the Lodge, "Looking right into its Buddha-nature," and calls him "about the most gentle and enlightened person I have ever known."²⁶ Because of his meeting with Suzuki, primarily, Watts calls 1936 "that year of true grace in my life."²⁷ Suzuki, he says, "used the force of gravity as a sailor uses the wind"; Zen, as he exemplified it, was "spontaneously intelligent living, without calculation."²⁸ Through this man, and this ideal, Alan Watts found his completion. Daisetz Suzuki was his last and ultimate model; through him, he perfected the identity he had been working on since childhood. It was an identity in which work was not to be separated from play, and all activity was illumined by a light-hearted mysticism. Above all, life was to be lived as a game of the imagina-

²⁵ p. 84.

²⁶ p. 78.

²⁷ p. 119.

²⁸ p. 122.

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tion. At seven, Alan Watts was an explorer of childhood rivers and woodlands; at fourteen (Martin Luther was convinced that turning points in a man's life occur in multiples of seven) he was contemplating eggs named Paradiddle and Transom; at twenty-one he discovered the *mondo* (Suzuki fascinated me because he told endless *mondo*, or Zen stories, in which people who asked "What is the basic principle of Buddhism?" were given such answers as 'The cypress tree in the garden' or 'Three pounds of flax' . . ."29). The philosophy of Buddhism and the cultures of the East had nurtured in him a hope of viable alternatives to English pedagogy, and English stuffiness: a hope of recovering and recapturing his Paradise Lost, that realm of dreams where the imagination was allowed to flourish, where the freedom to enquire carried with it the joy of enquiry. Where the fun was in asking the questions, not gaining the answers, and where meaning was to be found in the fun.

And so, while he convinced himself in the last twenty-odd years of his life that Mill Valley and Big Sur and Sausalito were in some sense his Lost Paradise, it was truly in his mysticism that he recovered his dream. For I believe he was gifted with an innate mystical sense (as perhaps we all are). But for Croshaw and Humphreys, Suzuki and Hearn and the rest, he might not have come to recognize that mystical consciousness for what it is. Nonetheless it is there, from the beginning, in his childhood perceptions of the world around him, in the sense of mystery, in the very excitement of discovery and the joy of living. His youthful discovery of Buddhism simply offered him a vehicle of recognition, and a means of articulation.

The great gift of Suzuki, and of the Mahayana, was the revelation of how simply that often awesome and elusive mystical sense can be articulated. "I am what I am," writes Watts, "only in relation to what everything else is"—and acknowledges his debt to the Japanese Buddhist notion of *ji-ji-mu-ge*.³⁰ Or, in another formulation: "Thus 'to realize Buddha in this body' is to realize that you yourself are in fact the universe. You are not, as parents and teachers are wont to imply, a mere stranger on probation in the scheme of things; you are rather a sort of nerve-ending through which the universe is taking a peek at itself, which is why, deep down inside, almost everyone has a vague sense of eternity."³¹

²⁹ p. 78.

³⁰ p. 367.

³¹ pp. 376-77.