

NOTES FROM: *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life*, by Alan Watts

SUMMARY: Alan Watts introduced millions of Western readers to Eastern religion and philosophy, and personally, I'm well on my way to reading every single book he's ever written. All of them have made my life demonstrably better in some way, and I've just kept coming back to him over and over.

This book is a compilation of a few of his more controversial lectures, delivered at various American universities throughout the 1960s. Western culture wasn't "the enemy," except perhaps to the good life. Americans were "missing the point" of being alive, and their way of life alienated them from reality by making them feel rushed and harried, inadequate and insecure.

In his own way, he showed audiences why and how they became sick - why they never felt they were "enough" - and what to do about it. Or, not do about it, as the case may be. Because maybe we're not actually sick at all? Maybe there's nothing wrong with us at all? Maybe it's our society that's sick, and to be well-adjusted to it is no measure of good health in the first place.

"The Buddha was almost like the world's first and greatest psychotherapist."

"The way to becoming awakened is offered like a doctor's prescription, based on what a patient might ask a doctor. Specifically, the name of the disease, its cause, and whether it can be cured and how."

"You can hold water in your hand for a time, but if you clutch at it you'll lose it completely."

"You need to lose or release your breath in order to have breath."

"When you really get *with* what you're experiencing, *feeling* what you're so afraid of or worried about, you cease to be afraid or worried."

"Just as it is a surprise to the beginner on the bicycle to regain control over his machine when he turns in the direction of his fall, so it is an enormous surprise to human beings to find that when they accept themselves instead of fighting themselves, they're in much better control of themselves."

“The self is the actual process of sensation - there isn't a *senser* behind sensation.”

“Because we contain within ourselves the memory of previous actions, we believe that there is some substantial self behind it all.”

“The question of control inevitably arises and we start trying to control experience.”

“Trying to get out is really the same as operating under the same assumption that there is an *experiencer* that can be rescued.”

“Consciousness is intimately bound up with everything that is going on.”

“We don't have to *try* to live in the present. We have to understand that only the present is real. There *is* no past. There *is* no future.”

“You only ever have one step to take; this one. One rep; this one.”

“The person who can't sit for a while doing nothing will also never be able to act, because he doesn't know how to be *all here*. ”

“The purpose of life is simply to be alive. It is so plain, and so simple, and so obvious. Yet everyone rushes around in a great panic, as if it were necessary to achieve something beyond themselves.”

“The funny thing is that they're not even quite sure what they're supposed to achieve, but they're devilishly intent on achieving it.”

“It's very important not to look down on people and all their absurdities. They possess a kind of magnificence of their own.”

“The forgetting of the true nature of reality is a kind of artwork and master illusion.”

“All the crises of daily life make up the same feeling that you get at the theater when you are watching from the edge of your seat.”

“The mystic is the person who has realized that the game is a game.”

“All insides have outsides.”

“You are the inside and the outside is the whole cosmos.”

“Never say that your feelings are different than they are.”

“The way you feel about other people is never wrong. And it's absurd and dishonest to try and force your feelings to be other than what they are.”

“What has been problematic for Western man is not so much his struggles with other people and their needs and problems, but rather his struggles with his own feelings - with what he will allow himself to feel and what he won't allow himself to feel. He is ashamed to feel profoundly sad. He is ashamed to loathe somebody, because he has been told not to hate people. He is ashamed to be overcome with the beauty of something, because being overcome means not being in control. As a result of this repression, he ends up going out of his mind. We are always out of control when we don't accept our feelings, when we try to pretend that our inner life is different from what it really is.”

“Our feelings might not be a proper guide to action in all cases, but they are never wrong.”

“Suppose you could dream any dream you want, every single night. Eventually, you'd want a little variety, and end up dreaming the kind of dangerous life you're living right now.”

“It's as if the Brahman had said in the beginning: ‘Get lost, man. Disappear. I'll find you again later.’”

Chesterton: "The angels fly because they take themselves so lightly."

Apprentice: “Can you help me pacify my mind?”

Master: “Sure, bring your mind out here and I'll pacify it.”

Apprentice: “But when I look inside, I can't find it.”

Master: “There, it's pacified.”

“Ours is not a materialistic culture because it has no respect for material.”

"One might as well try to drink the Pacific Ocean with a fork."

“If we are supposed to be detached from this world, then why was it created?”

“Nobody can ever tell you who they are, only who they were.”

“People live a much richer life than they actually realize.”

“People rush around without noticing because they're in a hurry to go out and do something they believe is terribly important.”

“We use money to represent wealth. We use clocks to represent time. And we use yards and inches to represent space.”

"The faster you can get from Dallas to Honolulu, the faster Honolulu is becoming the same place as Dallas and the less reason there is to make the trip."

“Instant coffee is a punishment for people who are in too much of a hurry.”

“Time is nothing more than an abstract measure of motion.”

"It's like if you were to show up on a building site one day, and the foreman says that no construction can be done today, because we don't have any inches."

“We have the sensation that time is running out, and we bug ourselves with this.”

“Eternity is now. There is no time.”

“What you do is, of course, far more important than what you did.”

“‘Kindly let me help you or you will drown,’ said the monkey, safely putting the fish up a tree.”

“To come to this, to know that you *are* and that there is no time except the present, is to suddenly attain a sense of reality.”

“People don't love their country. They love their flag, which is an abstraction.”

“The process of thinking is also what is; thoughts in their own domain are as real as rocks, and words have their own reality as much as sky and water.”

“You are able to think immediately if you realize that the process of thinking is reality itself and detachment is an illusion.”

“Not only can you not escape, but there is not even anyone for whom escape is possible.”

“We use words and symbols to describe and control things, but then we forget that we did that.”

“If we had a method of capturing creativity that would automatically produce great artists - and anybody could go to school and become a great artist - art would soon become the most boring kind of expression.”

“Perfect virtue wouldn't even be desirable or possible in one person because then everyone else is bad or wrong, and conflict would necessarily ensue.”

“Superior virtue is not conscious of itself *as* virtue, therefore it is virtue.”

“The person who swims along with the river thus attains the entire force of the river behind everything they do.”

“The color of everything outside is literally what the nerve impulses *feel like* inside your head.”

“We never ever know whether a given event is fortunate or unfortunate, only our reactions to ever-changing events.”

“Your mind is not in your head, your head is in your mind.”

“If you ever think that you understand something about zen, you will have missed the point completely.”

William Blake: "Energy is eternal delight."

“It is only the person who has discovered that they are already there that is capable of action.”

“When you stop naming things, you start seeing them for the first time.”

Buddha's Final Words to His Disciples: "Be ye a refuge unto yourselves. Take to yourselves no other refuge, and work out your own deliverance with diligence."

“You wouldn't know whether you were superior or inferior without the presence of other people.”

“Life without death has no value.”

“Death is what confers individuality upon us.”

“It is your limits in space that constitute *you*, and not simply your limits in space.”

“Buddhism is like a raft in that, when you get to the other shore, you leave the raft behind.”

“If you ever get to the point where you think you can say ‘I've got it!,’ you haven't.”

“How can you have faith in democracy and believe that the universe is a monarchy?”

“The most dangerous idols are not made of stone, but of ideas.”

“If you are god, then you can't have an idea of yourself any more than you can chew your own teeth.”

“When we are not aware of ourselves except in a symbolic way, we are not related to ourselves at all, and that is why we all feel psychologically frustrated.”

“Your idea of you is as much as you can fit inside your conscious attention.”

“Sensible people get paid for doing what they enjoy doing.”

“We often define the world as something to which we don't really belong.”

“What seems like conflict on one level of reality is actually harmony on a higher level.”

“You can't have separate stars unless there is space separating them.”

“Every little organism depends on its total environment for its existence, and the total environment depends on the existence of each and every one of those little organisms.”

“Just as you can't have a front without a back, you can't have individuality without commonality.”

“Look at the spaces between people, and try to switch foreground and background, what you think is important and unimportant.”

“We can open our hand, but we can't tell anyone how we did it.”

“Each point in the universe is the center.”