# EASTERN WISDOM

INCLUDES

*What is Zen?* • *What is Tao?*
*A Introduction to Meditation*

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A L A N  W A T T S

*An Introduction to Meditation*
has also been published as *Still the Mind.*

MJF BOOKS
NEW YORK

Published by MJF Books
Fine Communications
Two Lincoln Square
60 West 66th Street
New York, NY 10023

*Eastern Wisdom*
LCCN 2001091577
ISBN 1-56731-491-0



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Text Design: Tona Pearce Myers
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# WHAT IS ZEN?

ALAN WATTS

*"Each one of you*
*is perfect as you are.*
*And you all could use*
*a little bit of improvement."*

— Suzuki Roshi, founder
San Francisco Zen Center

## Contents



# Introduction

*By Mark Watts*

Zen is a method of rediscovering the experience of being alive. It originated in India and China, and has come to the West by way of Japan, and although it is a form of Mahayana Buddhism, it is not a religion in the usual sense of the word. The aim of Zen is to bring about a transformation of consciousness, and to awaken us from the dream world of our endless thoughts so that we experience life as it is in the present moment.

Zen cannot really be taught, but it can be transmitted through sessions of contemplation or meditation, called *zazen*, and through dialogues between student and teacher, called *sanzen*. In the

dialogue between the student and Zen master the student comes squarely up against the obstacles to his or her understanding and, without making the answer obvious, the master points a finger toward the way.

Zen has enjoyed an increasing popularity in Western literature. D.T. Suzuki's book *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* was first published in the English language in 1907, and authors R. H. Blythe, Christmas Humphries, and Alan Watts all made early contributions to Zen literature in the West. Alan Watts wrote his first booklet on Zen in 1933, followed by his first book, *The Spirit of Zen*, in 1936 at the age of twenty-one. He moved from London to New York in 1938, and after spending nearly ten years in the Anglican Church headed west to California in 1950, where he began to teach Eastern thought at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco.

There he met Japanese artist Sabro Hasegawa and beat poets Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsburg. His classroom lectures spilled over into the local





coffeehouses, and in 1953 he began weekly live radio talks on Pacifica station KPFA in Berkeley, California. Early radio series included "The Great Books of Asia" and "Way Beyond the West," which were later rebroadcast on KPFK in Los Angeles. In 1955 he began work on *The Way of Zen* with the help of a Bollingen grant arranged by Joseph Campbell, and following publication in 1957 he went to New York on the first of many cross-country speaking tours that continued over the next fifteen years.

The selections for *What Is Zen?* were drawn from his later talks, given after he had studied and practiced Zen for many years. Most of the material is from recordings made during weekend seminars in which Watts reconsidered Zen with a small group aboard his waterfront home, the ferryboat SS *Vallejo*, in Sausalito, California.

Instead of focusing on the historical background of Zen, he presented the subject directly, in a way he felt would be most accessible to his primarily Western audience. The result is a unique and effective example of the *sanzen* dialogue in practice, and although the words were delivered to

a group, the individual's psychological hurdles are addressed with uncanny sensitivity to the "mind traps" that typically confound students of Zen.

In a delightful play of words, Watts's experienced presentation gives us a healthy, heaping serving of the essential wisdom one discovers with the experience of Zen, and points a finger towards the way.



# PREFACE

*By Alan Watts*

Although not long ago the word *Zen* was unknown to most Europeans and Americans, it has for many centuries been one of the most potent influences in molding the cultures of Japan and China. It would be as great a mistake to leave out the consideration of Zen in a history of Japan as to omit Christianity in a history of England.

Zen remained relatively unknown to the world, however, because until rather recently the exponents of Zen were hesitant to spread the doctrine abroad for fear its essence would be lost. This is because Zen is a practice based entirely upon a

certain kind of personal experience, and no complete idea of its truths can be given in words. Finally in the early years of the twentieth century various Far Eastern writers — among them the noted Dr. D.T. Suzuki — made known the details of this remarkable way of life. It then became apparent to Westerners that Zen is responsible for many of the things that fascinate us about the Far East, including the martial arts of *judo* and *aikido* and the exquisite aesthetic flavor that characterizes Chinese and Japanese art.

Many hold Zen to be at one with the root of all religions, for it is a way of liberation that centers around the things that are basic to all mysticism: awakening to the unity or oneness of life, and the inward — as opposed to outward — existence of God. In this context the word God can be misleading because, as will be seen, the idea of a deity in the Western religious sense is foreign to Zen.

The aim of this book is to act as a guide to give the contemporary reader some idea of the basic principles of Zen. My intention is to point out the way by offering the rudiments of the path to those whose





search for truth has been hindered by the dogmas, creeds, and misunderstood rituals that choke the road of modern religion.

In the Western world we have become accustomed to thinking of spiritual concerns as being distinct from everyday life. We think of the spiritual as being other worldly, and therefore those art forms that portray spiritual subjects do so with symbols of the divine that transcend everyday materiality.

But in the art of Chinese Zen Buddhism one finds a supreme concentration on the most common aspects of everyday life. Even when the great sages of Buddhism are depicted, they are rendered in a secular style, just like very ordinary people, and more often than not as wandering idiots and tramps. The significance of this extremely human portrayal is that it shows us that their attitude about the relationship of the soul to the body and of mind to matter is entirely different from ours — in fact they do not really consider the spiritual life in those categories at all.

We feel that our soul is separate from the body,

that spirit is separate from matter, and by extension that God is separate from the world. And as we have confronted and tried to reconcile ourselves to this material world we have come to identify ourselves as a kind of detached soul, and therefore we have come to feel that there is a problem with material existence. We believe that life is something that we must conquer, or something we must somehow get out of. But either way we feel distinct from it, and think of ourselves not as a part of the natural material world, but as separate from it, dominating it, and trying to master it.

The art forms of Chinese Buddhism, however, express quite a different point of view, a point of view for which the material, everyday, ordinary world is not a problem to be solved or a conquest to be made.

It would be a bit of relief for us if we could see the world as an extension of ourselves, and ourselves as an extension of the world. In order to understand how Zen came upon this view one must consider the environment in which Zen first arose, which was the native Chinese world of





Taoism. When Buddhism first came to China it was most natural for the Chinese to speak about it in terms of Taoist philosophy, because they both share a view of life as a flowing process in which the mind and consciousness of man is inextricably involved. It is not as if there is a fixed screen of consciousness over which our experience flows and leaves a record. It is that the field of consciousness itself is part of the flowing process, and therefore the mind of man is not a separate entity observing the process from outside, but is integrally involved with it.

As a result, in this philosophy the fundamental conflict between the mind of man and the flow of life is seen to be an illusion, something unreal that we have imagined. This illusion arises because the human memory is a part of this flowing pattern that has the ability to represent former states of the pattern, and this gives the impression of a certain permanence to the behavior of the pattern. We must be aware, however, that our impression of permanence is a kind of thought process that appears to be separate from the pattern upon

which the record is written, but is really part of the pattern as well.

The practice of Zen is to experience the overall pattern directly, and to know one's self as the essence of the pattern.



PART I

# A SIMPLE WAY, A DIFFICULT WAY

# A Simple Way, A Difficult Way

Zen is really extraordinarily simple as long as one doesn't try to be cute about it or beat around the bush! Zen is simply the sensation and the clear understanding that, to put it in Zen terms, there are "ten thousand formations; one suchness." Or you might say, "The ten thousand things that are everything are of one suchness." That is to say that there is behind the multiplicity of events and creatures in this universe simply one energy — and it appears as *you*, and *everything* is it. The practice of Zen is to understand that one energy so as to "feel it in your bones."





Yet Zen has nothing to say about *what* that energy is, and of course this gives the impression in the minds of Westerners that it is a kind of "blind energy." We assume this because the only other alternative that we can imagine in terms of our traditions is that it must be something like God — some sort of cosmic ego, an almost personal intelligent being. But in the Buddhist view, that would be as far off the mark as thinking of it as blind energy. The reason they use the word "suchness" is to leave the whole question open, and absolutely free from definition. It is "such." It is what it is.

The nature of this energy is that it is unformulated, although it is not formless in the sense of some sort of "goo" which is just a featureless mess. It simply means that at the *basis* of everything, there is something that never could be made an *object*, and discerned, figured out, or explained. In the same way, our eyes have no apparent color to us as we look at things, and no form of their own. If they had a form of their own, that form would distort all the forms we see — and in some sense their very structure does distort what we see. If

the eyes had a color of their own it would affect everything we see, and still we would never become aware of it. As it is, however, we are not aware of the color of the eye, or of the lens, because if it has a color to it that color is basic to all sight. And so in exactly the same way, you might never become aware of the structure and the nature of the basic energy of the world because *you are it*, and in fact, everything is it.

But you might say, "Well, it really doesn't make any difference then." And that is true, it doesn't — but it *does* make a difference in the life and feeling of a person who realizes that that is so! Although it may not make any particular difference to anything that happens, it points directly to the crux of the matter. If there were no eye, there would be no sight, and this tells us something important about our role in the world. We see this sight and that sight, and the structure of the eye does not make any difference from this sight and that, but upon it depends the possibility of seeing. And so upon this energy depends the very possibility of there being a universe at all, and that is rather important.





It is so important, however, that we usually overlook it. It does not enter into our practical considerations and prognostications, and that is why modern logicians in their respective philosophy departments will argue that all assertions about this energy, including the assertion that it is there at all, are meaningless. And that in a way is true, because the world itself is — from the point of view of strict logic — quite meaningless in the sense that it is not a sign or a symbol pointing to something else. But while that is all taken for granted, it nevertheless makes a great deal of difference to how you *feel* about this world, and therefore, to how you act. If you *know* that there is just this; and that it is you; and that it is beyond time, beyond space, beyond definition; and that if you clearly come to a realization that this is how things are, it gives you a certain "bounce." You can enter into life with abandon, with a freedom from your basic fears that you would not ordinarily have.

You of course can become quite "hooked" on the form of life that you are now living. I can consider myself as "Alan Watts" to be an *immensely* important

event — and one I wish to preserve and continue as long as possible! But the truth of the matter is that I know I won't be able to, and that everything falls apart in the end. But if you realize this fundamental energy, then you know you have the prospect of appearing again in innumerable forms, all of which in due course will seem just as important as this one you have now, and perhaps just as problematic too.

This is not something to be believed in, however, because if you believe that this is so upon hearsay, then you have missed the point. You really have no need to believe in this, and you don't need to formulate it, or to hang on to it in any way, because on the one hand you cannot get away from it, and on the other hand you — that is, you in the limited sense — will not be there to experience it. So there is no need to believe in it, and if you do believe in it that simply indicates that you have some doubts in the matter!

That is why Zen has been called the "religion of no religion." You don't need, as it were, to cling to *yourself.* Faith in yourself is not "holding on" to yourself, but letting go. And that is why, when a Zen





master hears from a student the statement, "Ten thousand formations, one suchness," the Zen master says, "Get rid of it."

That is also why, in the practice of certain forms of Zen meditation, there is at times a rugged struggle of the person to get beyond *all* formulation whatsoever, and to throw away all hang-ups. Therefore the person endures long hours of sitting with aching knees in perpetual frustration to try to get hold of what all this is about. With tremendous earnestness they say, "I have to find out what the mystery of life is to see who I am and what this energy is."

And so you go again and again to the Zen master, but he knocks down every formulation that you bring to him, because you don't need one. The ordinary person, however, upon hearing that you don't need one, will forget all about it and go on and think about something else, and so they never cross the barrier, and never realize the simplicity and the joy of it all.

But when you do see it, it is totally obvious that there is just one energy, and that consciousness

and unconsciousness, being and not-being, life and death are its polarities. It is always undulating in this way: Now you see it, now you don't — now it's here, now it isn't. Because that "on" and "off" *is* the energy, and we wouldn't know what the energy was unless it was vibrating. The only way to vibrate is to go "on" and "off," and so we have life and death, and that's the way it is from our perspective.

That is what Zen is about. And that is all it is about.

Of course, other things derive from that, but in Zen training, the first thing to do is to get the *feeling* of its complete obviousness.

Then what follows from that is the question, "How does a person who feels that way live in this world? What do you do about other people who *don't* see that that's so? What do you do about conducting yourself in this world?"

This is the difficult part of Zen training. There is at first the breakthrough — which involves certain difficulties — but thereafter follows the whole





process of learning compassion and tact and skill. As Jesus put it, it is "to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves" — and that is really what takes most of the time.

You might then divide the training in Zen into two stages that correspond to the two great schools of Buddhism: the *Hinayana* stage and the *Mahayana* stage. The Hinayana stage is to get to *nirvana* — to get to "living in the Great Void." But then the Mahayana stage is to "come back," as the Bodhisattva comes back from nirvana out of compassion for all sentient beings to help even the grass to become enlightened. And it's that Mahayana aspect of Zen that occupies most of the time of learning to be proficient in Zen.

I offer this by way of introduction just to make everything clear from the start, and to begin without being deceptive about it or befuddling you with cryptic Zen stories! Although the stories are really quite clear, the point often does not come across very easily to Westerners. The fascinating principle underlying Zen stories with all their seemingly irrelevant remarks is quite simple. It is

all explained in the *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, when Hui-neng says,

> *If somebody asks you a question about matters sacred, always answer in terms of matters profane. If they ask you about ultimate reality, answer in terms of everyday life. If they ask you about everyday life, answer in terms of ultimate reality.*

Here's an example: Someone says, "Master, please hand me the knife," and he hands them the knife, blade first. "Please give me the other end," he says. And the master replies, "What would you do with the other end?" This is answering an everyday matter in terms of the metaphysical.

When the question is, "Master, what is the fundamental principle of Buddhism?" then he replies, "There is enough breeze in this fan to keep me cool." That is answering the metaphysical in terms of the everyday, and that is, more or less, the principle Zen works on. The mundane and the sacred are one and the same.