

Liber AAA – The Art of Anarchic Artha

A look through the void via Alan Watts

The Out of Order Order

1993

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Do not expect finished product. This is only the first blanking that follows a new reincarnation of ideas.

1. A PREAMBLE FOR ORIENTATION

Something is missing. It's everywhere and it's missing. In the desire to escape the unbearable compression of the blockage at the heart of consumptive culture, those attempting to escape are leaving something out. Or rather taking something with them — something that twists them even more tightly into the maddening enantiomorphic circles of the spectacle which they most urgently desire to avoid. "The" counterculture becomes just more of the same. Always it's stasis > rebellion > assimilation > more conformity > stasis. Yet the OOO has found a source of information that breaks vicious circles by using nothing less than things involved in their creation, namely words and self-consciousness. We don't like the dimming of intelligence involved in creating hero figures, but in this essay we are concerned with creating a sounding board that resonates to ideas in the here and now, not in the past. Our source of words is to be found in the writings of a supposedly "60s" supposedly "guru" called Alan Watts. In order to learn the rules on which many of the subsequent developments of the counterculture are implicitly or explicitly based, we have found no better writer. After reading certain of Watts' books, concepts that are lazily taken for granted in countercultures leap into clarity. And some ideas that seemed good become as dross when awareness shines on them.

Awareness is something that shows up the misuse of language by the dogmatic. This could be why Watts got into a lot of trouble with those who thought he was somehow duping people through not being entirely serious about philosophy and ethics (and these are very serious things, right?), especially in the more self-consciously "serious" circles of (barf) "personal development". In fact there is a clue here as to why his work is still so deeply refreshing and exciting long after countless other 60s "gurus" have faded into deserved obscurity. He was fascinated with the idea of the "rascal-guru", as exemplified by figures such as Gurdjieff, Crowley and Krishnamurti. They were all people who lacked the ponderous niceness, the correctness that for some reason is your passport to acceptance in the conventional, reactionary spiritual community. Yet perhaps this is why he has been abandoned, both by lazy New Age pensioners, and more individual seekers of escape from the hallucination of history. Many of his "followers", especially in the 70s, took chunks of his ideas with the deepness taken out, and used them for stupidly shallow games that paradoxically repressed those they were meant to help. Belief systems the same as the ones that went before, but with a surface gloss of eastern culture, with magickal methods as opposed to intuitive insight. Methods aren't the most humane and efficient thing to use when you are suffering the freezing fear of death or feeling cut off from society.

In Psychotherapy East and West Watts drew a parallel between the attitude of psychotherapists and that of eastern gurus when faced with a potential 'disciple' — all gurus, like psychotherapists, trick people into awareness by getting them to act and think consistently on their false assumptions. This is a hard path for those suffering from arrogance or excessive submissiveness, and so people go off in search of a surface solution, which then invariably fails when the crisis

comes. And yet the answer to everything is right here now, and therefore the search is strangely pointless, a mysterious comedy.

The humour/serious dichotomy can easily be used to cover up lazy thinking, which in the context of a “guru” is indistinguishable from self-righteousness — “Look it may not add up but I think it’s right, it’s my unique insight, so believe it, OK?” This never occurred for Watts, for he had an impeccable self-doubt, frequently insisting ‘think for yourself and don’t trust me.’ Perhaps his most important transcendence was his compassionate humour. Humour should go with insight in order to be true humour — it offers escape from painful misuse of the mind’s capabilities. And in today’s countercultural milieu perhaps this sort of humour could do with being cultivated. (“The outward and superficial aspect of religion should be ascetic and solemn, to conceal the guffaws in the inner sanctum” — *In My Own Way*, 1972.) But through compassion Watts realised too that existence is an unusually ecstatic form of Joy, ranging from that of intense fear and screaming agony, to pure delight. He had great respect for the existentialists, valuing their ideas, but also insisted that the meaninglessness of life was in fact an intensely powerful working of what can only be called Love, in a completely new sense.

“This is where Freud and Jung seem to be wiser than the existentialists: they see that death is the goal of life. Nonbeing fulfils being, just as space does not negate what is solid.”

— *Psychotherapy East and West*, p.114 (1961)

At times there is a dash of something sinister in his writings, a devil-may-care attitude towards things that are supposed to be important — something far too rare amongst scholars of eastern philosophies. This shows that it appears that Watts had vaulted over the most restrictive bastion of Control, authority, the Spectacle: he no longer regarded death as serious. This is in fact the key that opens the door to freedom — but this is by no means clear (even though you might think it is). Your mind is almost certainly more muddled than you thought.

He “grounded” spirituality, bringing it back to earth with his assertion that “matter is spirit named”, and with his contemplation of nothing less than the “mystery of existence itself”. This helps to explain his complete avoidance of the “heady”, “spaced-out” escapist wish-fulfilment scenarios usually found in nearly all so-called spiritual circles, from theosophist through gnostic to beat Zen, with their snobbish disdain for “mere” matter. To matter-hating gnostics the OOO says: the fear of gravity is groundless.

“I’m not saying that there is no afterlife, but that *believing* in it keeps us in bondage.”

— *The Book*, 1967

... as does making a belief out of denying it. This may make him seem something of a wet liberal Bishop of York figure given to much “well of course we mustn’t take this too literally” type platitudinising but as anybody who has experienced even a small threat of dissolution of the ego will testify, this sort of theorising can be *dangerous*. Yet only by taking life lightly can we enjoy it and be creative.

There are two modes of knowledge — external and internal. External knowledge is excellent for forming theories, predicting and taking note of the outside world without getting cluttered by psychological prejudices. Internal knowledge is to do with things such as feeling that you

exist, emotions, aesthetics, and so on. Tragically, these two modes have become horribly mixed in the course of history. Religion as become a truly sadistic assault on the inherent freedom of the conscious human organism through becoming an external system of rules enforced by a spurious “higher authority”. Similarly, the world of objects has been reified as something that human life revolves around, with psychological happiness depending on acquisition. But it is no exaggeration to say that for some people at least a thorough, concentrated reading of Watts’ writings could actually help untangle this crossed wire situation. Because his language is alive. It is written from the viewpoint of interior knowledge and thus carries the *feel*, the *intuition* of Eastern philosophies through the way he puts his words together. Picking up on what is lying behind the words, what they’re actually driving at, is a very good way to cultivate your inherent bullshit detector. Everybody’s got one, they just get scrambled and disconnected by the Spectacle. It means that the externalised *trappings* (and we use that word advisedly) are unwrapped. Sometimes the scales fall away from the eyes to reveal a lucid aid to existence, sometimes just a rotten, desiccated mummy of dusty dead book-learned drivel flops lifelessly to the floor.

In terms of supposedly “concrete”, “objective” theory, eastern philosophies are empty. They don’t actually have much inherently to do with Zen monasteries, sensitive landscapes, tea ceremonies, buddhas and that deadly dull kindliness of spirit associated with the standard New Age approach to the spirit. The philosophies of the east change *action*, and in essence are therefore invisible if you’re looking for coded sets of beliefs that can be just plugged into to get enlightenment (whatever *that* is). Analytically searching for the essence of, say, zen buddhism by just acting Japanese is like trying to work out somebody’s personality from a photo of them. You can only get so far, and can easily be misled by appearances. (This is why we mistrust sympathetic magick.) But Watts’ writing flowed from insight — they were simply unblocked linguistic activity. It was the Tao, but being language also *suggested* the Tao.

As a result, Watts thoroughly avoided the obscurantist mumbo-jumbo and world-denying wishful thinking that has come to be associated with ‘mysticism’ in most peoples’ minds. Neither was he anti-intellectual. His prodigious naturally-occurring intellect worked so well because it worked without strained effort. Intellect for Watts was an essential aspect of the Self, its very own blissful dramatisation. It would spoil it to misuse it. Big words and unusual terminology would tend to obscure the feel of the philosophies — as would shallow easy-to-digest simplifications. This seemed to almost demand the populist approach of his books from *Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951) onwards. Despite the dangers of the message not getting across, Watts had such a keen grasp of every conceivable subtlety to be found in eastern ideas that this introduces an active element on the interested reader’s part to try and understand more fully what it is he’s writing about, an effort that goes beyond merely reading the books. The “populist” approach Watts used also tends to guard against the ethereal precious-isation that tends to go with interests in eastern philosophies, keeping the writing more direct, more practical. This is especially useful in these days of rampant politicised elitism.

Music is a good point of comparison, as there have always been prodigies who write sterile music, and only second division composers who sometimes “hit a right note”. A Bach fugue has no particular meaning outside of itself yet seems to speak directly to the human heart. A music *analyst* would dissect and point out the amazing complexity of structure and get us absolutely nowhere. At best one could turn out a Bach-ish fugue of no transcendental content, or join the dots while listening. But a *critic* could actually enlighten the listener by giving him a kind of

“rough guide”, “fuzzy logic” set of rather vague ideas about how to listen or what to listen for. They may appear “illogical” under rigid analysis, but they would *work*.

We must also note that Watts had no political correctness whatsoever — some anarchists are going to *have* to come to terms with this sooner or later if they want anarchy to catch on at all. Personally we’re a bit tired of the various agendas involved in old-style anarchy today, such as hating Macdonald’s (why not something even more evil and damaging like Rio Tinto Zinc?), never eating even organically reared meat (as if organic consumption and death could somehow be cancelled from creation — the “eating competition” as Watts put it), and being sorry for having a penis.

With Watts ruined old doctrines such as karma, reincarnation, even xtain symbolism, are given a vibrant new depth of meaning and practicality (and strange aesthetic beauty) by solely referring them to the world in which we find ourselves *now*, but from the viewpoint of internal knowledge. They speak instead for psychological realities that it is enormously therapeutic to be aware of. It’s a measure of how clogged with abstraction our minds are that people frequently complained they didn’t know what ‘sort’ of philosopher he was. Formally he was a Mahayana Buddhist, a Jungian christian, a zen buddhist, a Taoist. But because he was basically following up his own interests something curious happens. You can paradoxically make allowances for his personality and therefore find the real depths of what he was verbalising about in much truer, fresher form than you could with somebody desperately pretending to be objective. This gives you something suited to *your* personality, *your* particular needs for development.

We must note there are obviously traits in Watts’ writings that would not be found if he was writing today. For example, some of his later writing showed various attitudes that led to the downfall of the 60s countercultural movements. He was too easy going, too naive about how evil the major socio-economic interests were. He was also writing before feminism became a major issue, which personally we find somewhat refreshing in the post-feminist times. Contexts always change, and one has to sift through the more localised “fashionable” stylistic traits and information to find the important material. Enlightenment is not time-dependent with regard to culture, and therefore will tend to show up through various cultural influences as still being recognisable. One shouldn’t let current reactions against New Age pensioners and pill popping middle class hippies get in the way of the fact that once certain slightly quaint 50s/60s references are removed from Watts’ writings, there are enormously powerful ideas contained within.

2. EGO

The first important point is that Watts always knew that books about books, thoughts about thoughts are a serious, almost comical, waste of time. In a way this includes his own books:

“Let’s say (since in writing a book one has to say something) that reality or existence is a multidimensional and interwoven system of varying spectra of vibrations, and that man’s five sense are attuned only to very small bands of these spectra. That sounds very profound and may mean nothing at all, but in reading it one should attend to the sound of the words and not their meaning. Then you will get my point.”

— Does it Matter?, intro.

This is indeed more profound than it may first appear. It is connected with the first thing that needs to be addressed if we are to gain anything worthwhile from ideas of “spirituality”. Watts’ attitude to his own philosophising was that of somebody who regarded life as in a special sense poetic. This “special sense” has nothing to do with conventional ideas of art. Instead this sense, this feeling, of poetry was intimately connected with his idea that just as a tree might grow fruit, so thoughts of various kinds are also “grown” by the mind. And this includes philosophical thoughts. But the whole thrust of eastern philosophies is that there is something that easily tends to go wrong with the mind under social conditioning. Although this problem is “natural” in the sense that anything that exists must therefore be natural, it’s painful for many people, and in fact is now beginning to threaten our continued existence on this planet. In the world of our thoughts, we should be keeping biodiversity and weeding carefully, instead of trying to blitz our mysterious forests, our hidden earthworms, our plants that don’t fit, with pesticidal dogmas, bold assertions that certain types of thought must either die or be killed. The problem doesn’t magically vanish when there’s enough cultural distance, so that we can laugh off the ideas of other cultures as being irrelevant. The very idea of cultural distance is connected with this problem, as our culture has evolved the way it has because of it.

That problem is EGO.

There has been a longstanding fight going on due to the way that eastern philosophies tend to aim for a dissolution of the ego whereas in the West the ego is extremely important. In one corner we have Jung, Freud and their psychoanalytical offspring — on the other various extreme behaviourists, consciousness researchers and of course the mystics. It’s going to be a long fight. Yet must we concur with Jung’s view that the ego is so important you’re unconscious without it? That only the unusually advanced individuation in the east allows the ego to be temporarily switched off? That in the West we are actually psychologically *built* to have an ego? Or on the other hand that consciousness doesn’t really exist, being only a sign that the brain is functioning? Surely not. We’d rather go on an empirical argument: There is no such thing as the perfect human brain — this is a meaningless concept. Yet if any one mind has become enlightened in its imperfection, then *any* mind is open to enlightenment. Our brain structures are highly similar, and enlightenment is at heart the fullest acceptance of what we are anyway. Simple, no?¹ Too simple really, so here follows the rest of this essay.

For Alan Watts there was a way through the East/West impasse, one that did not destroy the useful intuitive insights of the West in the process. He pointed out that we have *resonance*, a feeling of feedback that gives “depth” (intensity) to life, much the same way that singing in the bath is so much more enjoyable (or even possible) than singing in a soundproof room, or that myths suggest several levels of meaning around the central theme. If this insight is linked with another very useful neurological model we can really begin to get somewhere. (Remember — if the model leads to intractable contradictions and difficulties, always exchange it for a new one if necessary.)

Although Watts looked with extreme askance upon Timothy Leary’s rampant use of drugs to expand consciousness, they were nonetheless good friends, and it is Leary’s model that is important here. Leary’s viewpoint concerns different neurological circuits that have built up in the course of evolution for different “needs” and which function in different ways. Circuit I is based around basic eat/avoid commands and is inherited from our reptilian forebears, whereas

¹ So why haven’t you become enlightened yet?

circuit VIII is non-local and some way outside space-time. Only circuits I to IV (the socio-sexual circuit) are usually developed to any complex level in the average human. Circuit III is the one that interests us here, as it contains verbal, logical, analytical thought. It is also self-reflexive, in the way that dictionaries all refer to each other, the way infinite regress creeps into logical operations, the way that trying to avoid particular thoughts gets you straight back into them. It is this circuit that forms “sketches” or makes models of reality for purposes of communication and scientifically probing things further. But it is all too easy for a strange phantasmic “stuck groove” ideas of the self to form in this circuit, which thinks it is disconnected from the outside world. *This* is the ego, *not* the whole of circuit III. It can be thought of as too much feedback from the left brain (where circuit III resides for the most part) which then leads to a kind of persistent cramp. It’s circuit III’s identification of the essence of being human with its own fixed idea of what it thinks circuit III is! All done without any help from the outside world. This illusory break between inner and outer can make the very idea of existing seem utterly horrifying, and ruins the natural functioning of the intellect.

The constant identification with a socially induced linguistic hallucination is what leads this false idea of the self, and the resulting profound sense of not being at home in this Universe. It is connected with the idea, first proposed by the biologist Gregory Bateson, of the “double bind”. This is a self-contradicting instruction, which traps its subjects in two logically contradicting courses of action. It’s found *par excellence* in the SubGenius admonition “Do as we say and think for yourself!”. A double bind is to be given two mutually exclusive courses of action and not being allowed to comment on them. **This touches at the heart of anarchism.**

“*Society* gives us the idea that the mind or ego is inside the skin and that it acts on its own against society. We are to play the game **as if** independent, but not to know we are playing **as if**. The individual is self-determining, but only by virtue of the rules. This is an insane definition of sanity.”

— Beyond Theology (1964) italics the OOO’s.

This is probably where Jung went completely off-track — as Watts pointed out, Jung’s idea of the ego had more to do with the Western linguistic division in subject and object that “goeswith”² ego. Jung made the classic, all-pervasive mistake of confusing the map with the territory. Just because we split everything subject/object doesn’t actually mean they’re there.

We can think of the ego as a “false” circuit, circuit IX, that interrupts the normal functioning of circuit III, causing it to block, stammer and crash, making input from higher “non-verbal” circuits seem 2-dimensional and intolerably inexact because they don’t fit into the self-reflexive circuit’s boxes, taking out all the insight and leaving a dust-dry dead inflexible book. It’s a form of uncleared mental rubbish that if left to accumulate leads to all manner of mental ill-health, from neuroses to full-blown schizophrenia. (Note for qabalists: IX is of course the mirror image of XI, the number of the “false” sephira on the Tree of Life. Is there anybody out there who’d like to let the OOO know their thoughts on this? Thanks.)

² “Goeswith” was a word Watts invented to get rid of conventional misguided ideas of cause and effect. Of course if things are interlinked, as mechanistic science insists, then everything is actually part of a single process. Use of “goeswith” can cut through ego-induced mental blindness almost limitlessly, simply because it’s a simple but useful idea. It’s a very necessary counterpart to Occam’s razor.

“A ‘thing’ is a unit of thought, a ‘think’”³ and because circuit III chops things up it is not actually suited for forming ultimate theories of everything (regardless of GUT scientists’ claims — in fact in order to come up with a real GUT, that explains chaos, emotion, and so on, it would have to resemble something really mysterious rather than a typical equation). When the “snapshot consciousness” of circuit III is operating as it was designed to, we find once again that we are “artistic”, because of our resonance. Selfconsciousness is not ego. This explains partly why the standard distinction between hard-headed realism and “artistic” activity is sensed to be false from the viewpoint of eastern philosophy. And for Watts’ part instead of thinking that he was revitalising art by making it concerned with the “tough facts” of life, which everybody from the kitchen-sink dramatists of late 19th century France to the poetic postmodern politicals viewed as a way forward, he simply viewed all aspects of Mind as aesthetic, artistic, devoid of meaning outside themselves, rich with meaning in themselves. This is simply *wu-wei* of circuit III. (*Wu-wei* has been translated at “knowing when to stop”, see further on in this essay.)

“As soon as any psychic content, any feeling, any thought appears to be an object of knowledge and we begin to look into it, the very act of looking into it bores a hole in it and it becomes hollow in the very act of doing that ... So when we find that there’s only the shapes of nothing, shapes around nothing, hollows inside everywhere — however small, however minute — ultimately just hollows, then the form itself becomes the substance and action acquires a totally genuine quality. In other words, play and genuineness become the same.”

— Play and Sincerity, from ‘Live in the Moment’, transcribed lectures vol. 3

Naturally there is still a tendency to overflow (decoration, pleasure in non-functional art, etc.) due to our self-consciousness. Resonance acts against mere plainness in art, and identification of art as being “only” life. Indeed while Watts insisted that much modern art is pseudocopyist garbage, he nonetheless has great enthusiasm for art which “is cleaning our eyes and ears”, such as the music of his friend John Cage, or minimalist painting. This attitude paradoxically leads to proper compassion for the external world, and tends to militate against art for art’s sake, as instead all the activities of the human mind are artistic. And it isn’t a call to only create “nice” art since if the artist is fully involved with life, then he will reflect *all* of life in his activities.

Thus we can see a new kind of *identity* between artistic activity and life in general, one that freely admits human beings’ tendency to create without tying it down to preconceived ideas that spring from stupid theorised abstractions. Our self-consciousness produces attractive/exciting art, and also can be viewed as the universe unfolding itself further by creating human beings, with all the psychology that socially-based self-consciousness implies. It’s an interesting idea, anyway.

The addition of “depth” can also be understood not just as a kind of “consciousness algorithm”, but also as the way we perceive things *psychologically*, as an interplay of complex ideas and emotions. Life is *maya*, which Watts interpreted as meaning not so much illusion as “magic” — impressively skilful activity that fulfils itself through playing out a drama. This is a central idea in the philosophy of Vedanta. Watts’ conception of this beautiful and incredibly advanced philosophy was radical — too radical for many Vedantists, who in practice tend to be aesthetes

³ From The Way of Liberation, Weatherill

and world-deniers. As Watts was by nature nothing of the sort, his conception of Vedanta as being a call to truly live life to the full ruffled a few feathers. Still, it's easy to see in the long run who's philosophy looks most vital.

3. VEDANTA

Vedanta⁴ is notable for the way it regards the development of psychology as inherent to the Universe — humanity was inevitable. There is latent in Vedanta philosophy an extremely potent interplay of art and science and the OOO is surprised not more people have explored this. Watts elucidated Vedanta by performing an act of mental judo on reductionist materialism by running it to the point of (synergistic) self-destruction. In *The Book* he used the metaphor of a dead planet that evolved tubes. These tubes began to discover that they could eat at one end and excrete at the other, which permitted an evolution in complexity to the point that they could make noises to each other for territorial, warning, and mating purposes. Eventually they developed to the point where they could make noises about the noises they were making. This is futile and yet so *marvellous* in its futility and strangeness. Why should it seem so remarkable? Why not just adopt the standard tone of crypto-Protestant despair that's so fashionable in the art world these days? Why not just *complain* about it all like most people do?

In the myth of Vedanta, at first there was the Self (also known as Brahman or *atman*, the soul). It was unified, blissful and perfect in every way, and therefore got lonely and bored. So It had a tendency to make things more interesting for Itself by forgetting its existence. For creative kicks, it temporarily lost control and went random. It went to sleep and dreamt. At first there were just reasonable “dreams” of pleasant, unsullied creative play. This was *krita-yuga*. It was unhurried and lasted ages. But eventually to keep things alive some instability had to appear, a touch of evil, a cloud on the horizon, a fleck of ugliness in the beauty. Furthermore the Self decided to *forget* that it was dreaming (think about it). This was *dvapara-yuga*, and because of the increase in entropy, it went more quickly. Then to really get things going evil gained an equal footing with good, which led to a lot of temporary imbalance and in-fighting. This was *dritta-yuga*. But in the end even this was not enough of an expansion of creativity, and so it was inevitable that evil must gain the upper hand. The Self would utterly dissolve and shatter into an endless abyss of decay, destruction and despair. This is *kali-yuga*. Everything rots from the inside. Kali stalk the earth to destroy all people. As time has been accelerating logarithmically throughout this scenario, things begin to race for destruction. And at the end, when the darkness is infinite, everything is utterly destroyed in the *tandava*, the fire dance of Shiva. And the Self wakes again with an orgasmic shiver of unalloyed delight. It has gone to the utmost to create an outpouring of Itself into forgetfulness, for this is how love works. Everything is perfect and pure once more. Until It becomes bored again.

Here again we see a re-telling of the problems of ego more vivid than in any other religion. The ego is *kali-yuga*. The idea of accelerating time is seen most clearly in serious panic attacks and schizophrenia, where time seems to stall and stretch into an infinity of agony as the ego fights to get out of the Universe, the mind, that gave rise to it. Furthermore, the idea of uncleanness

⁴ Literally “the end of the vedas”, these being the standard Hindu religious texts. In a similar way that Christ said he came to fulfil the Law, so Vedanta was meant to be the living version of the previously rote-learned versions of Hinduism.

and disease is special to those with too much ego. In depressive states entropy is seen as a hellish burning or rotting away of matter. This is why if you can see Kali as beneficent, performing a good and useful purpose, your mental hygiene will improve drastically. Black goes with white. Decay is what gives rise to new life. Hence Kali's femininity. She also has the shortest time cycle to be found in Hindu mythology – a total of 28 days. The cycle of new life.

So we can see that the “dead” planet wasn't – rather it was more like a tree that fruited. The planet “peopled”. Quite slowly, but it did, whether by Darwinian selection or whatever. Then we note that this means there's a “self”-ish quality to the universe as it's been and gone and made selves. Never mind that there weren't any once – that was in the past, and the past only exists as an idea in the present moment. Even if it was a random “monkeys with typewriters” scenario, then it's still happened. It all seems to make a passionate kind of sense. Not logical at first glance, but entirely understandable on the deepest levels of thought.

4. TAOISM & BALANCE

We need pay no attention to the tedious feminism that insists that Female is Good, somehow “better” than maleness. Matriarchy, patriarchy – they're all archist and therefore pointless static dualisms that simply show their proponents haven't got rid of their dualist christian cultural psychological conditioning as much as they may have at first thought. With Taoism we get the idea of a dynamic balance, where it's OK to link femininity with destruction because destruction is an entirely natural thing. As Watts said, “nothing is the most dependable thing there is”. The idea of somehow coming to terms with the darker side of existence is of the utmost importance in Taoism. Western culture as a whole is based on an entirely humourless, furious, unyielding rigid and neurotic denial of the ying, negative, mysterious, female. This in turn leads to a great deal of mental ill health that in fact is regarded as being somehow normal by “respectable” people, laudable even. Philosophers such as Bertrand Russell write books like *The Conquest of Nature*, moralists insist that we purify ourselves by suffocating our darker side, and nearly everybody simply refuses to seriously acknowledge the existence of death (while simultaneously gorging themselves on horror films by way of a non-serious compensation for the very real horrors that are lurking in their subconscious).

Most peoples' predicament is like that of somebody who's noticed the boat they're in is keeling to one side, and in their haste not to fall over the edge move further towards the side nearest the water for safety.

But the dark goes with the light. It can't ever be annihilated, so when temporarily repressed it tends to just come back on the double, at the most inopportune moment, and with extra destructiveness. The sickness of trying to annihilate the dark side is at the heart of Western civilisation. If you cling to the light or the dark, your mind cramps. And if you want to avoid cramp, you must learn to accept the dark.

“And so in order to feel good, to feel that life is worthwhile, that existence is worth going on with, in order to bring out that feeling, just as the red brings out the violet, there has to be in the back of our minds, maybe very far away, the comprehension that there is something that could happen, that absolutely must not happen, that is the horrors, that is the *screaming meemies at the end of the line.*”

– ‘The More Things Change’, *The Essential Alan Watts*, p.80

Or as Watts used to say of himself, “What else could a light shine in if it wasn’t the darkness?”

Furthermore, we must note that whether you’re following the Left or Right hand path, you’re following a mere path, a static, stuck plan of action that tints everything one colour, tilts everything one way. (And we all know what we think about One Way xtians don’t we?) There is no need to make a point of following a path at all in the first place — they’re just earlier versions of rails. To take the example of the Indian *vama* marg, and excremental path much lauded by magicians such as Kenneth Grant — all the supposed new flexibility and freshness of outlook that comes from following this path reminds us of is feeling better after you’ve finished banging your head against a brick wall.

Because of the constant neurotic clinging to yang ways of existing, we do indeed lose touch with the darker side. Thus in order to come to terms with it we have to rediscover what it is. But this is an ongoing process which doesn’t mean that any attempt to manifest the dark side should be made. An attempt to explore, yes, an attempt to dig up, no. The ying is dark, hidden, and ceases to be that way when forced into the open. In the open, it is simply deformed and destructive to those foolish enough to do this (such as those who insist on following “left hand paths” without ever straying off them). The dark side is something that shocks the conscious, rational mind out of rigidity when discovered. It’s not something that you just mix in like putting milk in tea. This is very hard for Westerners to understand because they have very little feeling for the dynamic interplay between yin and yang, the idea that everything moves and cannot be made static. One good analogy can be found, however, in mental processes summed up by phrases like “We have nothing to fear except fear itself” or “We only hate hate”. Thinking for a while on what is implied in processes like this can give a good feeling of how to integrate the darker side into life without splattering yourself with it and ending up an utter mess.

The decision to follow a path at all in the first place implies a lack of trust in the organism itself. But this is the old tedious double-bind again. If you can’t trust your organism then how can you trust any course of action you take to repair it? The realisation of this absurdity is what has given Taoism its well-known anarchic bias. Laws, conventional book-learned morals, repression of the weird and so on, are all indicative of a lack of trust in human nature (which mistrust is also unfortunately promoted by many counter-culturalists). But even if we *are* born murderous, what can we really do about it, bearing in mind that repression is one of the very things that promotes irrational outbursts of passion? To even be conscious and think anything at all means that we’re working as well as we can work. Anything else is just mental knotting and delusion-illness.

Because Watts wasn’t scared of the negative, he never made the mistake of thinking that nature’s nice and pretty and life is gentle, pointing out instead that nature is based on mutual murder. For Watts it was an “eating competition”, though this didn’t stop him from taking to task Darwinians for having ideas regarding reality in general that had long been surpassed by other branches of science. He avoided sentimentalism even, or rather *especially* when talking about philosophies such as Taoism, which normally are used for orgies of wishful thinking about life.

So what does “accepting the negative” entail? In a balanced state, fear and negativity is still possible — it is just not indulged in in the same crushingly static, insistently serious way. It wears off after a while, instead of being made a constant mode of life, of artistic expression.

With regard to the Big One, we note Watts’ attitude to death:

“You were kicked off a precipice when you were born and it’s no use clinging to the rocks for security on the way down.”

This type of utterance is used as an *upaya* – a skilful means – to help readers realise the non-reality of the ego, by way of at least attempting to come to terms with their own negativity regarding death. He pointed out that there is no point whatsoever in repressing fear of death (compare that to most 60s gurus’ inane fantasising) or any aspect of the dark, ying, side of existence. Yǎn-men’s admonition, “when sitting, just sit, when walking, just walk – don’t wobble”, can be the basis of a profound *living* of agony without being so foolish as to try to escape unbearable pain, which only makes the pain worse and dulls our deeper, inner understanding of what it really is. The truly enlightened person is not afraid to scream when being tortured, and in fact screams for all his worth because he is fully involved in the situation.

Taoism leads to a relaxed but intensely aesthetically attentive attitude summed up in the concept of *wu-wei* – “knowing when to stop”. *Wu-wei* is literally “non-action”, but it means only a lack of the illusory mental striving and comically overdone tension that normally is mistaken for action anyway. It is doing everything *totally* without breaking off from it to self-check all the time. It is not dimming the resonance of your thought by splitting it against itself. It’s easy to see here how martial arts developed from T’ai Ch’i (which system itself is based on imitation of various animals’ movements).

Another important concept is that of *tzu-jan* – spontaneity. In the absence of having a King Ego ruling your head, the Universe isn’t thought of as having a ruler either. So things happen “of themselves” – *tzu-jan*. A good example is the one quoted by Watts of crystal formation. It seems to require a coordinated formation of molecules that mysteriously come together synchronously to form the crystal. This can’t be explained by reductionist science, and was a phenomenon that added to Rupert Sheldrake’s musings on the morphogenetic field.

Finally we note that the “fuzziness” of Taoism gives its proponents enormous mental/physical strength because they go with the flow of nature. When the reed bends it does not break. Far from making you just nice, Taoism makes you *you*, which is something very interesting compared to the dullness of aspect that comes from assuming you’re separate from nature, with all the moral, work-based, self-fighting repression that goes with that egotistic attitude. This is why Taoist Masters tended to have very interesting characters. Ego makes people all alike – being rid of it permits people to be fully, unconditionally original. When you’re acting in a unified field with your environment, well, that’s the Tao.

5. ZEN, GRAMMAR, COMPASSION

Ideas can only be communicated when they are understood from the inside (i.e. “practically”) as opposed to merely intellectually. This is the whole point behind zen buddhism. Intellectual understanding isn’t everything – how do you intellectually understand a beautiful sunset, or a particularly unnerving serial killer? You don’t – you *feel* from the inside something powerful about the human condition. Practicality is not superficiality.

The central communication of zen is that *life is not a problem*. It aims to unblock circuit III and thereby bring about a clear awareness of the organism/environment process. Nothing more, nothing less. We have all had experiences where we were dreading something because of what was probably going to go wrong, and what a lot of possible hassles there could be, and then found when the time came everything was simple, enjoyable, even.

We shall be very annoyed if when we die, we realise that we are not scared, yet we have spoilt our whole life worrying about death.

The “problem” of life (in fact all that “Human Condition” boils down to) is circuit IX’s attempt to last forever even though nothing does (except nothing, of course)⁵. Awareness of this is what we lack, because our heads are humming with too much self-referential verbal overactivity. The way around this is to observe. We are to work with everyday life instead of carelessly abstracting through reductionist logic. All systems, including the body, are too complex to warrant divisive, exacting measurement of every known variable before action is taken. Indeed chaos maths has shown us that it is outside the conventional magnitudes of measurement that important information is sometimes found (like the chaos mathematicians’ discovery that it was the *n*th decimal place that was affecting equations’ outcomes). To stop entanglement in over-analytical thought, first clear the mind and LOOK. This isn’t as easy as it sounds – it’s easier. The main problem seems to be people are curiously unable or unwilling to accept this. Yet just a few minutes of not thinking about experience, just doing it, seems to bring results.

“It is important to *unthink* at least once a day, for the very preservation of intellectual life. If you do nothing but think, as you are advised to by most of the academic teachers and gurus, you will have nothing to think about except thoughts.”

– Om: Creative Meditation (lecture transcripts)

Thinking about thinking is sometimes called postmodernism.

Zen uses koans as a kind of double-bind to get people to feel the uselessness of linear language when used to plumb problems such as being alive, existence, etc. One well known one was the answer to a zen student who complained that his mind just couldn’t be pacified: “Bring out before me your mind that needs pacifying!” Koans use the illogicality of language against itself in order to disarm it, *judo* style. Like many psychotherapists do, they get the sufferer to act on his own false assumptions, primarily the one big ingrained assumption that we are somehow separate from the world.

There is one notable Western philosopher, however, who seems to be aiming at something similar. Watts viewed the writings of Wittgenstein as a form of *jnana-yoga*, intellectual bending and stretching which makes the mind supple and ready to realise profoundly its identity with It. As he was led to point out, many of the questions that seem so deeply meaningful, such as “Why are we here?” and “What is Existence?” are strictly speaking meaningless; somehow we get ourselves tied in mental knots whereby this isn’t understood or felt at all.⁶

Wittgenstein started out using the linguistic logic first developed by Frege and Russell, but in trying to explore the construction of language, ended up transcending philosophy itself in the process. His *jnana-yoga* starts with using Russellian analysis to show how grammatical form can conceal the logical form of a sentence. This analysis acts extremely corrosively to get rid of self-contradiction and hidden assumptions by applying self-evident rules of logic to analyse grammatical constructions and break them into their most basic component parts. Complex sentences very often feature a grammatical “clouding over” of logic as they compress assumptions

⁵ And not even that, actually.

⁶ Mention could be made of the sufi story ‘Why We Are Here’ as an illustration, perhaps, of the mental processes involved here.

into too little a space (“Try me for size, babe” would be a good example of a very complex construction hiding out in a simple sentence — what *could* it exactly mean?). This is where metaphysical problems tend to creep into arguments — they refer to things that don’t exist, but we become grammatically deluded by the seemingly convincing layout of language that the *questions* raised actually mean something in the first place. And as language gains its meaning socially, we can already see a similarity (concerning ego) with eastern philosophies. Wittgenstein was originally involved with logical ‘atomism’, which states that complex sentences are derived by linkages of ‘atomic sentences’. These are in turn built out of atomic facts, which are the basic, ‘given’ units of language that cannot be analysed further (e.g. saying ‘apple’ to refer to, well, an apple). This already brings to mind a link with zen-style mysticism via Korzybski, who liked to point out that the experience of ‘water’ is not a word — you can’t drink the word ‘water’.

The *jnana-yoga* reaches another level when we start to work out how atomic facts are linked with atomic sentences in order to be logically linked together into complex sentences. In order to make a proposition that links an atomic fact with an atomic sentence, you already have to think of an atomic sentence that goes with it. This is because they’re atomic, not complex facts. (All we can do here is recommend that the reader checks out some Wittgenstein, sorry). Any attempt to describe the linkage will be itself a logical, and therefore complex, statement, capable of being analysed back to its atomic components. Wittgenstein used peculiarly suggestive language to suggest how the linkage is actually made — he called it ‘showing’. An ironic slant on the old Chinese saying “a showing is worth a thousand words”! We’re also reminded of zen’s insistence on ‘direct showing’ of reality. We ‘picture’ (not mentally, but logically) due to the activity linking the atomic fact with its sentence, ... but ... something’s gone wrong here ... what about the theory of talking about all this in the first place? It’s not logical, it’s not atomic, it’s not even tautological. It must therefore be meaningless, complete nonsense. The whole of Wittgenstein’s philosophy is a giant koan used to tease the mind out of linear, logical thinking, and “that whereof one cannot speak one must consign to silence.” The parallel with mysticism is obvious.

There are also implications for the place of mystical writing in the overall scheme of things. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (which ends with That Sentence About Silence) states that the limits of thought are the limits of what can be said. Again, another feel of what “stopping thought” could imply. Philosophies can only analyse the use of grammar, grammar being how language use derives its sense and nonsense. This means that Wittgenstein required that philosophers stop lapsing into language use connected with non-philosophical thought. When analysed using Russellian logic, many apparently philosophical writings turn out to have chunks of language use that are instead connected with language “games” such as condemnation, commendation, and so on. This led Wittgenstein to state that his aim was to bring language back to its “everyday use”, i.e. its proper home. Language can only truly be analysed as it is actually used. The use of course depends on the world view of the user, which is a given, non-analysable set of assumptions that are left after the analysis has reached the atomic level. A world view is the “logical space” inhabited by language, and is a framework of true/false constructive activity. It can only be ‘pictured’ through the use of language. **World view cannot be viewed in a broader concept, as that broader concept would itself form a world view.** In other words, to assume there is an essence of language is meaningless and pointless. **The same words can be used in entirely different languages.** This is perhaps what gives rise to that feeling that some people who are appearing to talk sense are talking drivel, and vice versa. This is very important when trying to deal with eastern philosophies, as people can become easy prey to the

next passing guru who will sell another version of institutionality with nice eastern trappings. As Wittgenstein said, **“DON’T LOOK FOR THE MEANING, LOOK FOR THE USE”**.

To press the point one more time, let us look at music again. Although all Western music uses a 12 tone scale, nobody (from the West) would ever dream of confusing Schoenberg with Wagner. The very *essence* of what their music is about, what it stands for, is utterly different. It is exactly this way with words. Words are empty (as John Cage enjoyed over the course of several records and a book).

There are further links between Wittgenstein and ‘eastern’ thought. Wittgenstein’s later philosophical investigations led to his own version of ego destruction — the public language argument. In essence this stated that as language only gains meaning publicly (through ‘showing’), it is nonsense to give descriptions of mental states as if the first person is uniquely placed to understand them. If you say “I’m dying for a drink”, you are using third person language systems. If otherwise, nobody would be able to understand what you were talking about! This is an *a priori* condition of being able to make sense of language.

We note then:

1. Spiritual ideas are often asked to prove themselves in the wrong language. When anarchists indulge in that jovially feisty no-nonsense rubbishing of spirituality as being irrelevant, they aren’t aware that they’re joining in with the language game of the scientists that would rubbish *them*.

2. “Spirituality” is a valid word, found in connection with attempts to describe or simply to make poetry, to “sing”, about non-verbal profound experiences. (“Mysticism precedes the subsequent argument about it” — Gneurosis 1, editorial [ii]). But the word “spirituality” needs destroying and rebuilding due to its persistent historical misuse in connection with semantic histrionics of authoritarian Control. For example (although he wouldn’t thank us for this) Bob Black is very spiritual due to his refusal to accept anarchism’s standard misuse of ideas and due to the uncompromising, concentrated playfulness of attitude he adopts. On the other hand, any number of eastern gurus are only concerned with selfish, symbol-ridden “personal transformation” that exists in isolation from the extremely ill society we find ourselves in today. Their language use shows this when analysed. (But remember this “analysis” is itself something that strangely tends towards the non-verbal — it isn’t just an academic activity.)

3. Ultimately words do not have any meaning in themselves. They are a form of given activity, like consciousness, like the Tao.

What happens when we have realised the meaninglessness of language? Things become effortless, for a start:

The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection
The water has no mind to reflect their image
— Zenrin poem (quoted in *The Way of Zen*, 1957)

Watts compared it to sparks coming from two flints. Life goes on anyway. This leads to a painfully important point Watts was very keen on putting across. We must *not* get the idea (unfortunately rather prevalent) that *nirvana* is a kind of persistent vegetative state whereby all differentiation is abolished, where everything dissolves into holy, gently glowing light. Watts viewed this viewpoint, common in the Pali Canon of Hinayana Buddhism, as fundamentally flawed for the simple reason that life continues anyway after Enlightenment. “Stopping thought”

is a language game that points to something outside thought, not an end in itself. The physical world cannot be abolished – and seeing as the outcome of Enlightenment should be a form of connection with the outside world which is commonly called *karuna*, compassion, then obviously we must carry on relating. Not because we *have* to, we just do. *Karuna* is simply

“The appropriate attitude of the organism to its social and natural environment when it is discovered that the shifting boundary between the individual and the world, which we call the individual’s behaviour, is common to both. My outline ... is also the inline of the world.”

– Psychotherapy East & West (1961), p.67

The *nirvana* of the Pali Canon (Hinayana Buddhism), with its blanking out of everything into an undifferentiated whiteout, tends more towards “religion” for religion’s sake, whereas Mahayana Buddhism is concerned with really living life to the utter utmost, including all the compassion that that has to involve for life to be truly lived.

Buddhism regards the cultivation of intuitive (direct) insight, *prajna*, as essential, and as Watts pointed out:

“Because ultimate reality has no qualities and is not a thing, it cannot become an object of knowledge. *Prajna*, direct insight, knows the truth by not knowing.”

– Way of Zen, p.102

furthermore

“If *prajna* is to see that ‘form is void’, *karuna* is to see that ‘void is form’. It is therefore an affirmation of the everyday world in all its ‘suchness’ [*tathata*].”

– Way of Zen, p.90

It is *karuna* that is so lacking in anarchist/spiritual circles these days. Everybody’s in it for the intellection and role playing, i.e. the quasi-religious aspect. Indeed look at how lacking in practical advice this essay is for a start!

Karuna is the answer to those who would say the “everyday use” of religious language games is simply something that cuts them off from everyday life (such as the Marxist assertion that religion is purely neurosis and will fade out if properly treated). Conventional religions, yes (the language doesn’t point to something beyond itself – e.g. Jesus really did physically resurrect), mysticism no (the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao).

So much metaphysics and philosophy falls into the trap of becoming fascinated and then entirely concerned with verbalising about itself. In academia, bibliographies are becoming strange attractors with the passing of time. They bifurcate over and over again, gaining more and more branches, ever more interlinked books – yet they are always contained within the same boundaries. Those boundaries may not change, but the scale of their reference grid which contains them has got progressively larger, to the point where philosophy as a separate discipline is being dwarfed by simply the everyday activity of our information-overloaded existence.

Yet when someone asked the Taoist sage Chaou-Chou what the Ultimate answer was, he replied, “Your everyday mind is the Tao.” He followed this with, “By intending to accord with

the Tao you immediately deviate.” Similarly Watts hints at the magical nature of existence but precludes all egoist systems of self-improvement. This may seem impossible, but that’s a good thing to expect, and so the OOO says Ipsissimus or nothing. Regardless of whether it is impossible or not, the abandonment of any effort to improve yourself, or to *deliberately not* improve yourself, should be experientially *tried* first — you may be surprised. The point is to clear the mind of self-blocking inadequate images, symbols of itself, in order to let it function to its best capacity.

Words may be regarded as creating reality in some way (as the gnostics might say), but it has been discovered that the ceasing of verbal thought seems to lead to awakening, Enlightenment. Because it is a different perception that is beyond the use of language, therefore language has to be stopped — hence zen stopping it with itself. Despite the common Western misconception of Eastern philosophies, thought itself does *not* stop (how could it?) but instead it’s not all caught up in itself.

6. “WESTERN” “EASTERN” PHILOSOPHY

Never mind labelling ideas ‘eastern’ or ‘western’. Look at whether they treat everyday life — *your* life — as a vague, ill-defined problem or something that in itself is the greatest mystery. Philosophy’s doing you a disservice if your daily problems only remotely intrude into a somebody’s irrelevant abstraction for mental stamp collectors who want a nice album of cleverly vacuous ideas to stop them from having to engage with the outside world. If an argument seems to require any number of buzzwords and special glossaries to work — get suspicious (and yes that may include this essay).

A good test for philosophies is what they imply about man’s significance or otherwise in the cosmos. The newly commonplace western notion that Man is insignificant is not really the entire picture. Due to our consciousness we feel as if we are significant individually. It’s no use trying to explain this away as it’s just how our consciousness works. It’s given. Frames of reference shouldn’t be casually mixed. For the interplay between self/other to be well defined, for the unified field of organism/environment to be fully unified, self and other have to be there in the first place. So in some ways (“external knowledge”) we are indeed not the centre of the Universe at all, but in others (“internal knowledge”) we are. There is an interplay between voluntary/involuntary that is what defines the unified field in the first place.

7. SCIENCE

To return to the “reductionist materialism” of chapter 3, we note that this language game insists that reality is “only” material and entirely mechanical, with a pejorative, destructive slant to the idea of mechanism (the language game of condemnation). But if the entirely mechanistic universe of determinism has produced these thoughts of theology, metaphysics and poetry, emotion and aesthetics, then how can reductionist materialism say they are somehow false, as when Richard Dawkins constantly keeps snidely barracking religion? Evidently reductionist materialism is not what it always claims to be. Instead of a passionless, disinterested, purely-logical approach to unlocking how things work, it often becomes a language game that is inappropriate to the subject matter it barges into trying to get rid of. The very same reductive attitude that pro-

duced Darwinism was also the fictitious ego split that *alienates us from that very same supposedly "Darwinian" nature*. Furthermore, the moralist scientist (Dawkins is a good example) tells us we are wrong and we have to listen or remain stupid — and many of us do! They play on the love of repression we have that authoritarian society has given us. It is exhilarating to realise that you don't have to. The whole point of spiritual language is that a non-verbal reality has been sensed, so it's nonsense to expect "proof" of spiritual states. It is also impossible to suggest that that means they're not there — they are from a different use of language. What can be thought can be said, indeed, but if the thought is something non-linear, then the language use will be too.

Yet the actual *practice* of science is very useful. It starts off with quasi-Buddhist leanings in trying to clear peoples' minds of confusion and illusion — and indeed, isn't it almost spiritual to speak of illusion in the first place? "Clearing" the mind is of course related to what scientists do — observing, recording what is actually happening. This may sound obvious but it's been a long time since this was popular in academic philosophical and political spheres. (Although Wittgenstein managed to do this, we have yet to see philosophy disappear — and why should it necessarily do that, bearing in mind that humans have that streak in them?) Science is extremely valuable as long as it doesn't set itself up as a new and useless myth, and Watts frequently used scientific analogies to telling effect.⁷ He pointed out the fearless attitude of science, whereby questions are followed up without shying away from what is discovered. He was quite happy with the idea that matter might be all there is, because nobody know what matter actually is, how it really behaves, how time affects it, whether there are other sorts of matter, and so on. Besides, our organs of perception are limited. "Matter" as commonly understood doesn't exist, except in certain language games. This means that Watts was never truly a pantheist as many labelled him. Instead he was concerned with correcting the painful illusions caused by society's conditioning and myths, that are upsetting our whole sphere of existence. From his viewpoint the backlash against science seems inordinately silly because the myths of science are just myths, no more, and certainly no less. They have a certain use, and no more. Technological progress depends on the psychology that gives rise to it, as well as the society that psychology is part of/produces (more on this in the next chapter).

The awareness that was part and parcel of Watts' philosophies meant that he could be oddly prescient. Compare the earlier quote regarding play and sincerity from 'Live in the Moment' with the following:

"But electric circuitry extends the brain itself as an externalisation of the nervous system, and will therefore perform wonders of art (that is, of playful patterns of energy) which have to heretofore been seen."

— 'Art with a Capital A' in *Does it Matter?* (1969)

He seemed to have some idea of fractals around the time they were still in the process of being discovered. These quotes show another way in which Watts' writings were so powerful. Because people are whole, not disjointed in themselves, frequently insights from science can be applied to human psychology, or vice versa, enriching both as a result. The first quote isn't strictly speaking about fractals as such — indeed the lecture from which it is taken was about play and sincerity. Yet it somehow seems to also have a connection with chaotic mathematical models of

⁷ The thermostat analogy in *The Way of Zen* (page 158) is a particularly good example.

reality. Modern day chaos magicians such as Pete Carroll frequently make similar links, but from a viewpoint more narrowly specific to the world of magickal ritual than human psychology in general.

Regarding many “artistic” disciplines, such as “the humanities”, it is actually rather amusing to see various tortured academics moaning in intellectual agony (before they go home to their zen-influenced ultra-expensive gadget ridden warehouse flats) because they take for granted certain assumptions that are based on scientific ideas that were refused at the start of the century. Occasionally postmodern theorists will address some trait of eastern spirituality, but they often spoil it by trying to remove what makes it special. They remove the non-linear, irrational elements by appropriating them into a system that seeks to explain away non-linearity and irrationality. They attempt to place the spiritual worldview into a scientific, analytical one, and then wonder why nothing fits properly. The OOO finds postmodernism, especially when it descends to sociology, darkly amusing. For the wrong reasons.

As we shall see later in this essay, the enlightened attitude to matter has striking, important implications.

8. THE BODY, WORK, TECHNOLOGY, THE ENVIRONMENT

Miraculous power and marvellous activity

Drawing water and hewing wood!

– Chu’an Teng Lu

Outdated scientific attitudes and christian ethics (interestingly not so much Hebrew, Watts noted) still combine to deny the body. Watts however viewed the body as nothing less than a particular flowering of the Universe, frequently stating, “You did not come *into* this Universe, you grew *out* of it, like a leaf on a tree.” You may say “So what?”, but of course the implications are gigantic, as our whole social and economic structure is based on the illusion that we float around inside our heads and are “confronted with a world of alien objects”, that we don’t belong here, that we’re a mistake. This wouldn’t matter so much except that it clashes with our own psychology (never mind our own *illusory* conceptions of ourselves!), giving rise to suffering of every description, and also clashes with the way we see the Universe behaving. Another analogy often used by Watts was that of astrology, whereby a chart is drawn up at the moment of a person’s birth. In psychological terms, this is equivalent to saying that at that time, all the forces of the Universe were what combined to produce you.

The realisation of the worth of the body naturally meant that eroticism was important to Watts. His spiritualisation of sexuality seems much more balanced than most sexual writing from the 60s, and one can only wish that his ideas had been more influential. The main difference was that Watts saw that treating sex as *the* big thing about life only seems to entangle its practitioners even further in society-based problems such as alienation, loneliness and the commodification of sex (e.g. advertising). In fact placing a be-all or end-all importance on genital sexuality actually comes from the repressive structure of society. This prefigures several anarchists’ current ideas that the labelling of ‘sex’ as a distinct, certain type of genital activity renders passivation and control much more easy (see the ‘Cervix’ essay in Anarchy issue 35). It also echoes Freud’s idea that the earlier ‘polymorphous perverse’ sexuality of children is stunted by societal pressure and the ‘reality-principle’ into solely genital activity that is really a form of repression.

Nonetheless Watts was allergic to celibacy:

“If sexual abstinence is, as in so many spiritual traditions, the condition of enhanced consciousness, it is because consciousness as we know it is an act of restraint.”

— Nature, Man & Woman (1958), p.143

Furthermore he didn't oppose homosexuality as so many gurus do. They don't like it because it spoils the interplay between male/female, yin/yang that their philosophies depend on. It reminds them that there are more possibilities for pleasure in the human body than their overly 'spiritual' (i.e. intellect-ual) beliefs would permit. Instead Watts took the view that gayness obviously fitted into the overall scheme of creation, arguing in *Does it Matter?* that macho repression of homosexuality creates alarming levels of violence in state institutions such as the Army, Police, etc., and may even help to create them in the first place. Furthermore, yin/yang applies to all aspects of humanity, such as personality, sexual orientation, temper, physical build, and so on, so it's of course impossible to casually label people as sexually all one or the other.

It's interesting to note Watts' reference to restraint when we discover that he was something of a perv himself (he said this was due to his public school upbringing). He liked to spice up his sex with a bit of spanking for a start, yet managed to write about sadomasochism in very negative terms. Perhaps this is because in the 50s and 60s it wasn't really something you could accept — and indeed he seems unable to accept it in himself. One can only wonder what his attitude would have been today. Maybe he would have noted that SM involves a body based, less overly genital sexuality that involves creativity, sensitivity and imaginative flair not normally found in standard repressed relationships.

The discovery of a spiritual sexuality has important implications for work. The ego can be thought of as a mechanism of repression of unacceptable desires. We are not able to accept our repressed desires so a loop starts up whereby control can be wielded, but that control creates repressed desires, which cannot be accepted. The link with work becomes clearer when we begin to see that work is a “necessity” because of the way society is structured. Time control is an essential feature of the ego, with its redefinitions of the past and its inventive imagining of the future. Yet once the ego and its repression are gone we are living in the present moment, i.e. eternity. There is no more measured, clock-time. This is the state of Enlightenment, Freud's polymorphous perverse again — an egoless childlike (not childish) oceanic state. Reason, creativity, art are now at the service of Eros, not the other way round. Survival is no longer a necessity. Existence is a form of play — it's pure art. And art is basically play (“destroy art(ifice) by making everything art” — Gneurosis 1, Organum interview). Play is what humans are actually psychologically and physically made for. Yet via work, *the* double-bind strikes again. Although being already implies non-being, work is ? presents us with a *choice* between these opposites, with the full force of societal necessity. We must work to store up security and goods, to avoid our impending demise, to feed our dependants, to have something to pass on. Work is therefore tainted with death. This is not a negative to be accepted either: while existing it is illusory and meaningless to act as if your nonexistence was somehow already entirely present. Watts here was therefore a precursor to ideas such as those of Bob Black and the zerowork movement.

When life is play, work is simply impossible. There is no need for repressive religion either:

This very earth is the Lotus Land of purity

And this very body the Body of Buddha

— Hakuin, Zazen Wasan

This sort of quote tends to be misused by “everything’s all right” New Agers, but of course they forget two things — the return to the world of the *bodhisattva* and the interplay of yin/yang, which goes wrong if one attempts to either enhance or deny each aspect of the play.

If work is to be abolished in favour of play, technology must radically change its character. All advances in technology come from flashes of insight and inspiration — a mix of Taoist observation of the-way-things-are and something creative acting out of conscious control. Therefore technology needs to remember its right brain origins. When acting in a unified field with the environment, i.e. without an ego, at maximum resonance, technology is less likely to be something inherently destructive and alienating. It’s therefore worrying to note that avant-technologists tend to have no particular perception of how work could be done away with effectively in a non-alienating way. They only seem to want to streamline it and thereby make it faster, or make it ever more gadget-ridden, thereby lessening face to face “interface”!

Furthermore, as the ego is a matter of both individual consciousness (circuit IX) and society (the double bind) ecological ideas should address both these points. Watts again was way ahead of his time in that his concern for matters of ego and societal double-binding meant that he made the ESSENTIAL connection between *society* and Nature which is still woefully lacking in most present day Ecological movements.⁸ Too many radical ecologists treat mankind as a sickness — could they do us all a favour by killing us then?

The OOO bitterly resents attempts to deny the worth of mankind by using idiotic Malthusian, Darwinian and downright Calvinist arguments to suggest that we shouldn’t be here. This is a great way of increasing feelings of alienation from nature and each other. Indeed we cannot turn the clock back — but we could progress. We feel that as the left brain has overdeveloped on its own and has made us pathological, the right brain can and should be developed and integrated. We will then at last start to become intelligent enough to fit in properly with Nature. The signs are this is happening. There already is a growing new intelligence in mankind. It can be called psychotherapeutic, or metaprogramming. It’s not something that you pay a qualified person who you’ve never met before to deal with. It’s there when you start to realise your own conditioning, when you talk it over with friends, when you start to notice funny ingrained habits that you never knew were dominating you. It starts when you *give up* rationally grinding your way with the ego’s machine code through piecemeal ideas of what you are, and begin to see just what your “darker” side might be. It starts when you actually fully accept existential limits. And in a strange way it ends there.

9. THE END

Watts was not a pampered rich guru. He worked for a living, putting himself through an increasingly hectic schedule of lectures, all the while getting ever more seriously into boozing. Eventually he simply burned out and switched off. His third wife Jano Watts found him not asleep but dead in 1974, aged 59.

⁸ For more on this urgently important topic, read George Bradford’s superb booklet *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* from Times Change Press, c/o Publishers Services, PO Box 2510, Novato, CA 94948, USA.

Where does this leave us?

Firstly we note that those who promote aggressiveness, macho nihilism are doing the work of the tabloid press, regardless of whether they're involved in a "counterculture" or not. They are the enemies of those who truly want anarchy, as they are stultifying peoples' desires to escape an already oppressive daily existence. In the very places where you might expect to find some insight, instead there is the moronic braying, the idiotic blind cruelty of those who seem (in print at least) to consist of nothing but a solid, constipated ego. Why are these rigid fools content to restate and recycle outdated and oppressive myths? But our enemies must be respected as the ying and the yang depend on each other and can never "win" over each other. Anybody who suggests otherwise is bullshitting, fantasising a dogma with nothing to do with how things are in practice. Even so, the ying should be in place, kept mysterious while explored. It shouldn't be rammed down people's throats. Perhaps we should concentrate on a certain fierceness, bring out our collective yang — be active rather than too verbal and passive, and avoid this common mistake of new agers and those trying to get fair play between the sexes. This has nothing to do with conventional male macho attitudes. If it is to do with macho ideas, it is those of the code of Bushido, a state that can only be reached by leaving well and truly behind conventional ideas about masculine strength. To move to another tradition, it is a fierceness that perhaps could have something to do with Kali, the destructive that brings true wisdom. Fierceness that goes with the flow, that "knows when to stop" — *wu wei*. Watts pointed out that *wu wei* only means "non action" in the sense that "no mind" refers to enlightenment — there is still plenty of action, it is just unblocked.

The implications of action being unblocked are too subtle to put into words and must be sensed in real-life situations.

By mindlessly following the path of late 19th century materialist scientific myths, many anarchists are making sure there is a minimal apprehension of "spiritual" matters, thus ensuring that anarchism tends to be picked up as a fad and then dropped or modified out of existence within a few years. For one quick example, read Dick Martin's somewhat misguided essay on 'Spiritual Anarchy' in the Factsheet 5 book 'Anarchy and the End of History'. The problem appears as one of whether you "believe" in "God" or not, a painfully shallow treatment of the whole idea. Martin seems to realise that wonder is inherent in the human organism, yet makes no allowance for the fact that our intelligence is qualitatively different from all other forms found in nature — it must be or else we wouldn't have ruined the planet. Attitudes such as Martin's, which somewhat miss point, have plagued revolutionary movements since time immemorial. As a result they become too time-dependent and are superseded by greater unforeseen geopolitical changes because they are slow to react (out of accord with the Tao). Regarding this we should note the Tibetan Buddhist saying regarding following the spiritual path: "It is better not to start at all, but once started it must be followed right through." If you want to change, change yourself right through first, or don't bother starting. Years spent flitting from one fad to another are wasted time at the end of the second millennium — unless perhaps you are learning how fads form in the first place. Once belief in belief has been removed, you are more concerned with acting in accord with the Tao (whatever that is) than trying to construct some silly aesthetic intellectual theory that will somehow bring about a change in human society at all levels, or even adequately describe it.

Anarchism isn't catching on as much as it might because it needs somehow just to be more aware of how it's been affected by problems such as the mind/body split, the subjugation of matter as somehow tainted, the relativity of all beliefs, the remarkable fact of existence, good and bad.

If you want to call these “metaphysical” fine, but they’re also entirely practical, balanced and sensible issues that for want of being properly examined are strangling the growth of a new (or even better) society. They are the blank words, the empty thoughts, from which springs all the complex music of the game of human existence. These things are analysed, but only by academics – language is thus misused by being in the wrong context. It is not actually necessary to tie yourself in conceptual and verbal knots to see a situation(ist) clearly. Yet the more clear, the less verbal the realisation – this is where “living language” comes in.

And real anarchism is nameless. A newspaper columnist once said that “ism”s shouldn’t be abolished because that would do away with optimism. No. The phonetic sound “ism” is in fact used to refer to a certain unthinking solidification of outlook centred around collections of ideas and beliefs. Optimism now no longer refers to such a state, but instead to a *feeling*, to something more spiritual, something that could be called desire. And to complicate matters further, these two “ism”s can be mixed. Feminism, for example, includes both this sort of desire (to see the feminine liberated) and a lot of mental pseudo-scientific deadwood that people feel is wrong yet feel duty bound to follow. The same goes for all other “ism”s. The use of “ism” in a pejorative sense is there for a reason – a good reason if you are aware of language games. Some “ism”s don’t end in “ism” (e.g. Scientology), some words that end in “ism” aren’t “ism”s (e.g. optimism!). The whole point is that an awareness of language use can sort out where labelling is being used for hidden language game purposes. This would mean that “anarchism” in the pejorative sense does indeed exist, but it isn’t the “real” anarchism, which being something that’s different all the time can’t be pinned down for purposes of indoctrination.

Meanwhile we note that action that follows from enlightenment cannot really happen in isolation – as it is a removal of the isolation between individual and environment. Therefore for philosophies to be practical they must have a collective aspect. This partly explains why good ideas are never put into practice – the good ideas are simply lost in the noise of what the real world is actually like. There are a lot of stupid, or rather stupefied people out there, content not to think for the whole of their lives, or even unable to through circumstance. Therefore we need individual enlightenment to become widespread first. But when verbalised about this becomes yet another belief system. This is why we must try to cultivate some feel for internal knowledge, esoteric but *alive*. It is patently obvious that too many of those inspired by Watts’ ideas rapidly forgot his incessant warnings about confusing analytical thought with what is being analysed, thereby missing the whole idea of his communications, and producing very silly mystical meanderings that just don’t work psychologically, mythically or physically. They become just another commodity to check out.

The creation of consumer goods is the result of the faulty capitalist conception of matter as being separate to “wealth” (i.e. paper money). We feel separate to the environment so it can be plundered to create “wealth”. This is of course pure confusion of symbol with reality. For example, most ancient art was actually functional (for ritual, war, etc.) as well as aesthetic, whereas nowadays we have personality based art produced solely for galleries and consumer goods mass manufactured as cheaply and shoddily as possible and with no worth whatsoever. This results in imbalance at all levels of society with *real wealth* (goods, mutual aid, services) not shared because the abstract juggling of figures on paper prevents it. Naturally this connection between metaphysics, art, politics and economics has implications for anarchism, and we can perhaps see a thinking through of such ideas in connection with anarchists such as Hakim Bey and Bob Black, who bring a sense of spirituality and very intense, joyful playfulness into their writings.

For us the most exciting realisation was that the society of consumerist production is only there *because* of the mind/body Manichean split. Consumerism IS *dukkha* (“The desire to make life repeatable” — quoted in D. Rowe’s *Depression: The way out of your prison*, RKP 1983). So when anybody *thinks* they’re being rebellious by denigrating consumptive culture while nonetheless adhering to nihilist materialist myths (such as those found in *Apocalypse Culture*, S. Home’s *Smile*, *Vague*, *Re/Search*, etc.), no matter how shocking those ideas are, they find themselves gradually absorbed into the Spectacle, the object of the next consumer fad. (The only way out is to treat dark side information as one half of the equation, in which case you’re being spiritual just by doing that.) Spectacular society, being based on *dukkha*, PRODUCES and assimilates its own rebellion rather than engage with the outside world or inside psychology. That “rebellion” is in fact *trishna*, which is a feeling of grasping desire (this may seem like a big clash with the Situationists, but in life without ego, desire is *stronger* through not being constantly divided against itself). It is an attempt to stop time, to avoid suffering and death. Situationists torment themselves over the way this happens, never realising that their own unexamined metaphysics is ensuring that they remain entangled in this very process of assimilation of rebellion by mass culture. Perhaps this is why their “desire” seems a bit vapid and uninteresting. Mass culture, especially from a Thatcherite view, is a negation of matter, an elevation of a non-existent individual (the ego) over nature, based on society’s conditioning who does battle with blind nature. Such processes lie beyond mere politics, instead arising from a philosophy that implies we do not belong in the world of matter. This negative nihilist materialist philosophy is a mental dis-ease that neatly manages to infect both the middle-class mediocrities of Grey Society *and* equally all those trying to escape that Society by exploring radical politics, and gnostic/quasi-gnostic self-enhancement techniques (e.g. the New Age, Jungian psychoanalysis). As Robert Anton Wilson mentioned at his 6.5.92 lecture at ULU, “Forget politics — it’s the last place change happens.” This is because of *trishna* — the clinging consciousness arising from incorrect metaphysics that makes everybody pointlessly attempt to make things last just for the sake of it. The difference between rebellion and conforming is only explicit, whether done with massive verbalisation or not. Implicitly they are part of the same process. And the Process is inherently destructive. It is a blockage in circuit III. This is why the perennial wisdom is so important, so urgently needed in these Last Days. (It’s also why we really could not give a shit about matter-hating gnosticism).

Alan Watts loved a good witty but devastating diatribe against competitive society and its mass production of worthless zomboid crap, and there was a deadly serious reason for this. We will simply self-destruct, slowly, agonisingly, wishing it wasn’t happening to us, as a result of the self-fulfilling prophecies of those who hate matter and love the ego.

The OOO looks with despair on the way that the latest generation seems only to find politics, money and drugs of any interest. Fuck politics — the last thing this tortured planet needs now is politics (and that includes academically self-conscious anti-politics). If you want people to start treating each other and this planet with respect it’s time to accept the complete sacredness of the very fact that anything is even there in the first place — *including* ourselves. Bring on the blooming of perennial wisdom. Let the rain come. The Flood.

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FURTHER READING

There are so many editions of Watts' books that we've just listed the ones we used, which are for the most part the most easily available ones, with ISBN for ordering purposes. However, for reference we have also included the date of the first hardback editions, nearly all of which were published in New York either by Random House or its subsidiaries Pantheon and Wildwood House.

The Wisdom of Insecurity (1951), Rider 0 7126 9588 5

The Way of Zen (1957), Pelican 0 14 020547 0

Tao: The Watercourse Way (1975) (with Al Chung Liang Huang), Pelican 0 14 022154 9

Psychotherapy East and West (1961), Vintage 0 394 71610 8

The Book (1966) paperback only, Vintage 0 679 72300 5

Cloud Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown (1973), Vintage 0 394 71999 9

Beyond Theology (1964), Vintage 0 394 71923 9

There are also several other books of more specialised interest.

anthologies:

The Way of Liberation (1983), Weatherill (Japan) 0 8348 0181 7

Does it Matter? (1970), Vintage 0 394 71665 5

Om: Creative Meditation (1980), Celestial Arts 0 89087 257 0

Essential Alan Watts (1977), Celestial Arts 0 89087 403 4

biographies:

In My Own Way (1972) — His autobiography, Vintage 0 394 71610 8

Genuine Fake (1986) — Monica Furlong. Unwin, London, paperback 0 04 44049 7. Furlong's autobiography tends to regard Watts as being schoolboyishly naughty, as if that negated or cast doubt on his ideas. But why should he always be happy, always swooning with bliss? Krishnamurti may have been, but he had it easy. And why, especially in the late 60s, should he conform to the sort of "nice" behaviour expected by new age pensioners these days?

related:

Into Each Life a Little Zen Must Fall — A. Keighley. Wisdom Publications, London, paperback 0 86171 034 7. Horrible title but recommended nonetheless.

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Liber AAA – The Art of Anarchic Artha
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