



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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BY MARK WATTS

**I**N THE BEGINNING of *Still the Mind*, Alan Watts mentions the gift he had been given — and it was a unique gift. Watts was able to take his readers and listeners on a journey beyond the often-ignored limitations of calculation and reckoning. Perhaps the greatest part of this gift was his ability to show us how to discover simple ways of getting out of the mental trap we create for ourselves.

In our modern society, it has become apparent that the power-based world — the world of politics, government, and international finance that influences all of us — has been absolutely hypnotized and driven crazy by words and by thoughts. We have become slaves to recurring patterns in an endless

stream of words. Our political leaders talk incessantly about our many problems, but it's as if they're speaking a foreign language one might call "memorandese." Almost everyone has had the experience of watching a political debate and wondering afterward what on earth the candidates were talking about. To some degree, all civilized people are out of touch with reality because we fail to distinguish between the way things are and the way they are described. For politicians this dichotomy has reached extreme proportions, but it affects everyone. We confuse money, which is an abstraction, with real wealth; we confuse the idea of who we are with the actual experience of our organic existence.

During the sixties and early seventies, Alan Watts lectured at universities and blossoming growth centers across the country. To help his audiences better understand their connection with the world, he would describe in great detail the many ways that our organic existence inseparably connects us to the entire world. Starting when I was sixteen, and on into my early twenties, I followed along whenever I could with a portable tape deck, recording his talks.

Whether the title of his talk was *Ecological Awareness*, *The Psychology of Mystical Experience*, or *The Practice of Zen Meditation*, he would often return to the theme of the inseparability of man and world. It was

something he grasped on a deep level and could invariably help his audiences understand. His essential point was that one's actual organic being is inseparable from the universe, but the distinct idea you have of this distinct wiggle of the whole universe, which you call your body, can very easily persuade you to accept the illusion that you are a separate entity.

One reason we fall for the idea of the separate, isolated self is that, even though we admire the beauty of the natural world, nearly everyone who has grown up in Western society has certain misgivings about actually living as an integral part of nature. Instead, we adopt certain conventions that allow us to live in modern society; we cultivate our consciousness in order to "rise above" the level of natural instinct.

At one extreme, we are rugged individualists who feel the need to conquer the physical world and claim new territory for mankind. But even those who do not try to dominate the world in a physical sense may try to overcome what they perceive as their animal nature through the repression of their natural desires. We see this manifested nearly everywhere in our culture in conscious attempts to adhere to abstract ideals of virtuous living.

But as Carl Jung wrote in his essay *The Stages of Life* that "instinct cares nothing for consciousness." Like my father, Jung believed that the problems we have are manifestations of our consciousness, and more

particularly, the direct result of self-consciousness and our attempt to make things better. This is at the root of so many of the dilemmas we create in so many areas of our lives.

Look at the issue of ecology, for example: Although we sincerely want to get along with nature and not destroy it, we still see ourselves as people living separately from the natural world. We are still not a part of it, due to a trick of perception that many people have called the ego. In reality the whole problem is a mental trap, and the only way out of the trap is to wake up and simply *be* in the real world.

It is necessary therefore to experience the real world directly — but here we run into a problem because some people believe that the real world is the spiritual world and others believe it is the physical world. Both of these, however, are simply ideas, concepts. As Alan Watts and so many others keep pointing out, the real art of connecting with the universe is to *stop thinking*, at least from time to time.

Practicing the art of meditation or contemplation can help us stop the perpetual chatter that goes on inside our skulls. As my father often said, “A person who thinks all the time has nothing to think about except thoughts, and lives in a world of illusions.” To the degree we can stop thinking and start experiencing, we are getting back to sanity, and to reality. In meditation

or contemplation we can occasionally discover a state of consciousness that is truly not self-conscious. But the only way to do this is by allowing all attempts to mentally describe the world to cease. If we talk all the time, we won't hear what anyone else has to say, and if we think all the time, we will never experience the nature of our organic existence.

In the following pages we will explore what lies at the heart of what may still to this day be considered a new way of thinking and living. As Alan Watts and many others have understood, there is nothing new in it: We are connecting — or reconnecting — with an energy as old as the universe, and with a form of wisdom at least as old as the human race, well understood by indigenous peoples and brilliantly taught by Buddhists and Hindus.

In *Still the Mind*, we are taken on an experiential journey. By participating in the experiments suggested, you will find a way to get back in touch with the reality that exists beyond our thinking — the great, unified reality our thoughts are supposed to represent but can never capture or express.

Alan Watts says it much more clearly than I do — and it has been a gratifying experience for me to spend so much time with the hundreds of hours of his words that were recorded on tape. He is a speaker and writer

whose voice has continued to have a great impact many years after his passing, and I believe it is well worth spending a few quiet hours from time to time with the book you're holding in your hands. You will see how he used words and thoughts to guide us beyond our words and thoughts, and you will come to understand that we are far greater, far more miraculous in our nature than our words can express.