



The Spirit of Zen

Alan W. Watts

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Alan Watts's *The Spirit of Zen* was one of the first books to introduce the basic foundation of Zen Buddhism to English-speaking audiences. This volume still stands as one of the most lucid and concise explanations of the origins and defining principles of Zen, from its beginnings in ancient India and its later transmission to China and Japan, to Watts's revealing portrait of life in a contemporary Japanese Zen monastery. In *The Spirit of Zen*, Watts describes, in plain language but without robbing the subject of its provocative subtlety, how one can prepare for a life of Zen. He explains the sacrifices and surrenders, the requisite self-control; the baffling set of spiritual exercises known as Koan, which take the form of verbal jigsaw puzzles; the importance of mental discipline; and the need to recognize the futility of mere intellectual haggling — all necessary steps along the road to Zen. Through text and illustrations, the author examines the tea ceremony, ink-drawing, landscaping, and swordsmanship, all Zen-infused aspects of Japanese life; they give an understanding not only of Zen, but of Eastern culture in general.

The Spirit of Zen Details

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From Reader Review The Spirit of Zen for online ebook

Johnny Cordova says

This introduction to Zen Buddhism is Alan Watts' first of many books on Eastern religion. It's a very satisfying read, written in the eloquent and lucid style that Watts would come to be known for. Watts had a way of simplifying the most complex concepts, as well as capturing the elusive. Here, he captures the elusive spirit of Zen.

The book itself is elegantly designed and a pleasure to hold in one's hands.

Paige says

AMAZING. My copy is not from 2006, more like 1966. It's tattered and sections are falling apart. I keep it together pushed together by other books. It's a BIBLE. It's a better codex than the bible!! Although it's not really a code to live by, it explains Buddhism SO SIMPLY that it exemplifies the philosophy of buddhism in the explaining of it. BRILLIANT. And truly underrated--READ IT!...just don't try and borrow my copy. Sorry.

Jesus Cris says

Helpful for any westerner who would like to see where to start with eastern philosophy. I knew most already so it was just refreshing

Peter Bourdeau says

Watts helped popularized Zen Buddhism in the West with the publication of this seminal work. Easy to read, the book is an excellent primer in the subject of Zen Buddhism.

No says

This one made the coveted favorites list.

"The drinking of tea had always been associated with Zen, and from the earliest times the monks used it to keep themselves awake during long periods of meditation. There is a gruesome legend as to its origin which tells that Bodhidharma once fell asleep during his meditations and was so furious that he cut off his eyelids. Falling to the ground they at once turned into the first tea-plants, and ever afterwards the drink made from its leaves has kept off sleep and purified the soul." - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.109-110)

"If anyone suspects Zen of sentimentalism, his suspicions will be swiftly set at rest by a consideration of the

life of the Samurai. In sharp contrast to the quietism of the Cult of Tea, Zen becomes fierce and stormy when it is expressed in ju-jutsu and kenjutsu, although there is still an underlying calm which, however, resembles the solidity of a mighty rock rather than poetical detachment." - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.115)

"To live with your wife and then see your eldest son grow up and be a man, and then not to shed a tear over her corpse - this would be bad enough. But to drum on a pot and sing; surely this is going too far.' 'Not at all,' replied the master. 'When she died I could not help being affected by her death. Soon, however, I remembered that she had already existed in a previous state before birth.... And now, by virtue of a further change, she is dead, passing from one phase to another like the sequence of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.... For me to go about weeping and wailing would be to proclaim myself ignorant of these natural laws. Therefore I refrain." - via, Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.18)

"...it was Zen which produced the alarming technique of ju-jutsu and kenjutsu (fencing), and the stern principles of bushido - the Samurai's code of chivalry. Thus the paradox of Zen was that it could combine the peace of Nirvana with the intense activity of battle and the common tasks of everyday life. To quote Takuan once again,

What is most important is to acquire a certain mental attitude known as 'immovable wisdom.' ... 'Immovable' does not mean to be stiff and heavy and lifeless as a rock or piece of wood. It means the highest degree of mobility with a centre which remains immovable. The mind then reaches the highest point of alacrity ready to direct its attention anywhere it is needed... There is something immovable within, which, however, moves along spontaneously with things presenting themselves before it. The mirror of wisdom reflects them instantaneously one after another, keeping itself intact and undisturbed." - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.104-105)

"I may be said to know a bit less about Zen than in 1935. For living Zen, as distinct from academic Zen, is above all a process of unlearning, of the abandonment of ideology, of all fixed forms of thought and feeling whereby the mind tries to grasp its own life. Thus I do not really know what Zen is, because Zen - the essential experience underlying Buddhism - is not a 'what'. It is not a thing, which is to say an aspect of experience definable by a word or concept. Zen is closer to what Korzybski has called the 'unspeakable' level of reality - the non-verbal, non-symbolic, and totally indefinable world of the concrete as distinct from the abstract. For all things, whether objects or processes, are abstracted from experience by thinking and naming. As Buddhism said so many centuries before semantics and metalinguistics, 'Originally not one thing exists.'" - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.13-14)

"...a book which purports to explain Zen is something of a hoax in the respect that the more it succeeds in giving the reader an impression of intelligibility, the more it has failed to give understanding. A proper exposition of Zen should 'tease is out of thought', and leave the mind like an open window instead of a panel of stained glass." - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.14)

"It has been said that the difference between Zen and other forms of religion is that 'all other paths wind slowly up the mountain-side, but Zen, like a Roman road, thrusts all obstacles aside and moves in a direct line to the Goal'." - Alan W. Watts (The Spirit of Zen, Pg.18)

THE DEAD CARCASS OF YOUR WISDOM WILL BE BURIED

"Briefly, this doctrine is that man suffers because of his craving to possess and keep for ever things which are essentially impermanent. Chief among these things is his own person, for this is his means of isolating himself from the rest of life, his castle into which he can retreat and from which he can assert himself against

external forces. He believes that this fortified and isolated position is the best means of obtaining happiness; it enables him to fight against change, to strive to keep pleasing things for himself, to shut out suffering and to shape circumstances as he wills. In short, it is his means of resisting life." - Alan W. Watts, *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work and Art in the Far East*

"To live with your wife and then see your eldest son grow up and be a man, and then not to shed a tear over her corpse - this would be bad enough. But to drum on a pot and sing; surely this is going too far.'

'Not at all,' replied the master. 'When she died I could not help being affected by her death. Soon, however, I remembered that she had already existed in a previous state before birth.... And now, by virtue of a further change, she is dead, passing from one phase to another like the sequence of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.... For me to go about weeping and wailing would be to proclaim myself ignorant of these natural laws. Therefore I refrain.' - via, Alan W. Watts (*The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.18)

"Spirit lacks all gravity and in so far seriousness. Seen from spirit nothing is heavy; it takes all things lightly. Not only the concept of toil, even that of suffering finds no object in it. There is toil only from the point of view of Gana (the Flesh); and man knows pain and sorrow only as a creature of feeling and emotion... Thus spiritual man must needs impress man of the earth as waiting in seriousness'." - Keyserling (*South American Meditations*, Pg.373)

Tao - Growth and movement; the course of nature, the principle governing and causing change, perpetual movement of life which never for a moment remains still.

Zen (Japanese) > Ch' an (Chinese) > Dhyana (Sanskrit) is a high state of consciousness in which man finds union with the Ultimate Reality of the universe.

"In reality there is nothing in the universe which is completely perfect or completely still; it is only in the minds that such concepts have arisen, and it is just those concepts which, according to Taoism, are at the root of human misery." - Alan W. Watts (*The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.36)

"I have no magic power; I make inward strength my magic.

I have neither life nor death; I make the Eternal my life and death." - *The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.120

"Zen can be defined as the unity of man and the universe, as the rhythm of the mind with changing forms," - Alan W. Watts (*The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.121)

"Tai-an asked Po-chang, 'I have been seeking for the Buddha, but do not yet know how to go on with my research.'

Po-chang replied, 'It is very much like looking for an ox when you are riding one.'

'What shall a man do after knowing him?'

'It is like going home on the back of an ox.'" - *The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.96

"It was the 'straightforwardness' of Zen that preserved their mental stability, and the Samurai would make frequent visits to the Zen masters that they might gather strength from the religion of 'going right ahead with no looking back', which taught that life and death were but aspects of the same existence, and which showed how 'self' might be forgotten in its unity with life." - Alan W. Watts (*The Spirit of Zen*, Pg.119)

Barbara says

Libro introduttivo allo Zen disciplina complessa nella sua apparente semplicità, ma forse proprio ciò che è semplice e sotto gli occhi di tutti i giorni non viene mai preso nella giusta considerazione e ci neghiamo volontariamente tanta parte di bellezza che ci circonda.

Un modo di approcciarsi alla vita molto lontano dall'ottica occidentale.

Bett Correa-Bollhoefer says

The most clear explanation of zen that I've heard.

Yuri says

A very basic (and yet worthwhile and informative) introduction to Zen and Buddhism, recommended for those with some curiosity and little knowledge on the subject.

Kaleb Phillips says

A wonderfully written introduction to the world of Zen, covering everything from the history of Zen, to the Tea Ceremony, the arts of Ju-Jutsu and Kenjutsu, and the ancient code of Bushido. This book gives a lot of information while giving very little, which is perfect when trying to describe the art of Zen, for Zen is life, and so it can never be truly described or contained, even on paper.

David Cornelius says

From what I have learned of Zen Buddhism, the notion of putting its core tenants into writing is a bit paradoxical, but, as with any subject, a bit of studying is required in order to begin down the path towards understanding. Watts' treatise of Zen is a wonderful place to start for the westerner just beginning to expand his or her pallet to the wisdom of the East. Whether you are a spiritual seeker disenfranchised with the monotheistic traditions of the West or a student of the world's religions, Watts provides a captivating introduction to the world of Zen that is easily accessible to anyone. However, a bit tautologically, this work is just a STARTING point, and I would argue that Watts had this in mind since he makes many references to D.T. Suzuki and many other teachers that further expanded the topics covered in this book. Overall, I enjoyed The Spirit of Zen tremendously, and I hope you do as well.

Jon Bash says

What it points at is fantastic. But the paragraphs are overly long and the explanations overly academic. Can't help but feel he's taken short of the task. Still, I got a ton out of this book and am really glad I bought an old used copy on a whim.

Jeremi Doucet says

Recommended by Zen Buddhist Dhruba Lama. Pokhara, Nepal.

So. Zen Buddhism. This unique, mind-boggling breed of Buddhism which is both profound and absurd, serious and playful, defined in all things but altogether undefinable, is a way of life that distinguishes itself from other religions and 'philosophies' by being so intrinsically intertwined with Life that trying to capture it with abstractions taints its essence and distances us from the true meaning of Zen. The Zen masters are renowned for their illogical, nonsensical hilarity when faced with serious questions. Mostly depicted in playful moods, laughing, they identify as 'old rice-bags,' and are wont to make a fool of anyone trying to find Zen through words, rationalizing, and philosophizing, for all of this escapes the point. This was a fun read, capturing the beauty of Zen Buddhism.

Shih-kung asked:

"Can you take hold of empty space?"

"Yes sir," replied the monk.

"Show me how you do it."

The monk made a clutching movement in the air with his hand, but Shih-kung exclaimed:

"Is that the way? But after all you have not got anything."

Therefore the monk asked, "What, then, is your way?"

Immediately Shih-kung took hold of the monk's nose, and, giving it a sharp pull, called out:

"That is the way to have good hold of empty space!"

There lies the essence of Zen buddhism. And more:

'When asked about the ultimate mysteries of Buddhism, [the Zen masters] replied, 'The cypress tree in the courtyard!' 'The bamboo grove at the foot of the hill!' 'The dried up dirt scraper!' Anything to bring the mind back from the abstractions of life.'

Luiz says

Segundo livro do Watts, leitura concisa e prazerosa. Introdução do Zenbudismo para leigos. Abordagem intuitiva de conceitos como Koan, Satori, Wu-wei(taoismo), Tao, Dharma, Karma, Samsarra, Nirvana, Budismo Mahaiama. Zen budismo é apresentado como filosofia em que o signo e significado devem estar harmonizados, por isso Watts deixa claro que ele apresenta alguns signos mas a busca do significado dependerá do leitor. E ainda aponta o rumo para isso desapego, observar o fluxo, não oferecer resistência (jiu-jitsu, arte zen, arte do espírito, no flow sem buscar perfeição). Perspectiva teleológica da ação o samurai manuseia uma espada, ele é a espada, não existe separação. Não existe um deus lá em cima que coordena os fluxos de eventos conforme nossas virtudes éticas. Somos ele, somos parte do todo e devemos estar em

harmonia com ele. Uma ótima leitura para, ainda mais depois de ler uma novela antinilista Demônios de Fiódor Dostoyevsky.

Arturo Javier says

Como una introducción al budismo zen, me parece que el libro tiene éxito. Por supuesto, yo no puedo ser el mejor juez de esto, porque mi entendimiento del budismo es más bien estrecho. Sin embargo, el libro posee varias virtudes de una obra introductoria, como claridad en la exposición, y el recurso a una serie de analogías que iluminan bastante bien las ideas más extrañas del zen. Por supuesto, como el autor enfatiza a lo largo de la obra, el lector no puede esperar obtener un entendimiento cabal del zen (ya que no es posible obtener tal cosa de un texto), pero una cosa que el libro sí ha conseguido, por lo menos en mi caso, es despertar mi interés en el tema.

Justin says

More history/academic than I like
