ALAN WATTS

THE WISDOM OF INSECURITY

A Message for an Age of Anxiety

ALAN WATTS

The Wisdom of Insecurity

Alan Watts, who held both a master's degree in theology and a doctorate of divinity, is best remembered as an interpreter of Zen Buddhism in particular, and of Indian and Chinese philosophy in general. Standing apart, however, from sectarian membership, he has earned the reputation of being one of the most original and "unrutted" philosophers of the twentieth century. Watts was the author of some twenty books on the philosophy and psychology of religion that have been published in many languages throughout the world, including the bestselling *The Way of Zen*. An avid lecturer, Watts appearted regularly on the radio and hosted the popular television series, *Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life*, in the 1960s. He died in 1973.

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The Way of Zen

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INTRODUCTION

by Deepak Chopra

Every book is a journey, but this one aims to travel everywhere and nowhere. It begins in a state of anxiety, which few people want to dwell on. It punches holes in shared belief and treats sacred things with irreverence and cocky quips. As if to ensure its failure, Alan Watts also proposes a paradox that being insecure is a malady of the psyche and at the same time an open door to an invisible reality, the only place where the cures for fear and anxiety will ever be found.

Yet with all these elements going against it, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, which was published in 1951, has found many spellbound readers, and I'm proud to call myself one.

In my mid-thirties, about the same age as the author was when the book was published, I found in Watts the perfect guide for a course correction in life, away from materialism and its empty promises. The new course headed into the most elusive territory one can imagine: the present moment. Here and now, Watts declared, lies the experience of the universe in its totality. "If happiness always depends on something expected in the future, we are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp that ever eludes our grasp, until the future, and ourselves, vanish into the abyss of death." A typical Alan Watts pronouncement, sweepingly ambitious, offering help

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at the price of subverting everything the reader holds dear. For in postwar America, life was all about progress and the lure of tomorrow. Where were we headed? First to the moon and one day the stars. How much could we achieve? Everything. What would success bring us? Riches and contentment that could never be taken away. Watts was the gadfly who pricked us out of our sleep. Progress was a sham, he said, and dreaming about tomorrow was pure escapism from the pain we fear today. What is popularly called "the power of now" was being addressed fifty years before its time.

Looking back, one realizes that Watts was a spiritual polymath, the first and possibly greatest of that type. He read omnivorously in philosophy, religion, psychology, and science—a sponge with a hundred arms, so to speak. He produced this little book at a turning point in his personal life. It was 1951, and he had just lost his vocation as an Episcopal priest, along with his young wife in a divorce. He had been following a longtime fascination with Zen Buddhism, leading him to spend his seminary years trying to fuse Eastern and Western mysticism. In the classic arc of coming-of-age tales, he was finally about to find himself. But he would do it in the strangest way, by declaring that there was no self to find. Lasting happiness—the underlying quest in almost all of Watts's copious writing—can only be achieved by giving up the ego-self, which is a pure illusion anyway. The ego-self constantly pushes reality away. It constructs a future out of empty expectations and a past out of regretful memories.

As Watts formulates it, in his brisk, deceptively simple

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style: ". . . tomorrow and plans for tomorrow can have no significance at all unless you are in full contact with the reality of the present, since it is in the present and only in the present that you live." Like a good preacher, he sounds emphatic and connected to a higher truth. But the message was too pushy and barbed for a comfortable Episcopal pulpit. Imagine any believing Christian, who cherishes the reward of Heaven and the second coming of Christ, hearing these words: "There is no other reality than present reality, so that, even if one were to live for endless ages, to live for the future would be to miss the point everlastingly." With swift jabs Watts demolishes the afterlife and dashes any hope that there is a better world to come.

Watts was alone in the wilderness back then. For an eccentric to dabble in Eastern thought was acceptable in his native England. Because it possessed India and strong footholds in China, England produced some minds who were willing to delve deeper into Vedanta and Buddhism than the usual blinkered colonialist. But America was different. No one needed to hear from an upstart who fancied himself the Pied Piper of all things spiritual (Watts's own self-description was "philosophical entertainer," although he was much more than that). But as I revisit the arguments offered so boldly in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, I can feel the shock of truth that it produced in me.

His opening chapter, "The Age of Anxiety," takes its title from a popular poem by W. H. Auden, and the first paragraph announces the first of Buddha's four noble truths, that life is full of suffering. Watts is canny enough not to

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mention the Buddha by name. Instead, he looks directly into the heart of a reader living under the shadow of the bomb, and poses an eternal question in terms that the existential fifties recognized: can it really be that human life is no more than a brief flicker of time, full of chaos and pain, between the darkness that precedes birth and the darkness that follows death? "We live in a time of unusual insecurity," Watts notes, after a century when traditional values—especially religious belief—broke down on all fronts. There have been two opposing reactions to the decay of belief: relief in tossing off the old shackles, and worry that reason and sanity will give way to chaos. But Watts wants to carve a third way, pointing out that belief has disappeared through careful doubt and examination. This is the first sign that he welcomes the insecurity others fear, and this quickly becomes the main theme. Without importing any Eastern notions that might scare readers off, Watts has already introduced the most basic Buddhist stance: sober examination of what lies before you, leaving aside all assumptions.

By holding on to this sense of openness, we can find all truth in ourselves. That promise, as held out here, echoes what saints and sages have taught in every wisdom tradition. Where the Buddha refused to answer questions about the existence of God, Watts is more inclined to smash idols. He uses modern physics as proof that there is no evidence for the physical existence of God, arguing that no such proof will ever be offered (a reckless prediction, but how could Watts have anticipated post-quantum theories that posit a universe imbued with infinite intelligence?). We can't reim-

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pose old myths on ourselves or believe in new ones made up out of a desire for comfort; therefore, the path of self-examination is the only one a person of conscience can reasonably follow. Otherwise, we will only numb ourselves to the meaninglessness of life, seizing present pleasure to avoid pain, a futile strategy—here Watts has slipped in the second noble truth, which is that pleasure can never cure pain since the two are connected.

Trapped between outworn myths and despair, there is another way, but it requires a revolution in thought. Ironically, this third way will resurrect the very things one must deny in order to walk the path. "The reality which corresponds to 'God' and 'eternal life' is honest, above-board, plain, and open for all to see. But the seeing requires a correction of mind, just as clear vision sometimes requires a correction of the eyes." It takes Watts twenty pages to reach this point, the real start of the journey, but by being simple, direct, and patient he creates a special atmosphere: the reader is beguiled into forgetting that he ever disagreed with any of the arguments being placed before him. That's an enviable thing for an author to do, and it was Watts's special gift. He takes a pithy truth from, say, the Upanishads—that fear is born of duality—and spins a long chapter about how animals experience pain, simply and without dread, while human beings are overshadowed by anxiety because of our divided selves.

I don't want to give the impression that *The Wisdom of Insecurity* is Buddhism for dummies—far from it. Watts keeps in mind that he is building toward very difficult concepts,

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centered above all on the concept that there is no individual ego-self. As a mirror of our own inner division, we have fragmented the world into inner and outer experience. We embrace our separateness without realizing that there is only one reality. The universe is a single process occurring in consciousness ("the great stream"), and only by merging into that process can we discover who we really are. No external experience will support us, because the flux of events is inescapable. Time itself is a creation of the restless mind; space has been created by the same mind to give itself room to wander when in fact there is no space beyond a mental construct that, like all constructs, eventually turns into a prison. These are difficult ideas to grasp, even more difficult to abide by.

The strategy Watts follows is not specifically Buddhist but goes back to the most ancient insights of the Vedic seers of India: eliminate what is unreal, and all that remains will be real. It's a simple but ruthless approach, since there are so many things we accept as real which are in fact merely symbolic: ". . . thoughts, ideas, and words are 'coins' for real things. They are *not* those things." Why, then, write books at all? Because words can point in the right direction; they can highlight overlooked flashes of insight; they can ignite the flame of discontent. In his beguiling way Watts aims to do all of that, but he knows that a map isn't the same as the territory it represents. Behind his authoritative voice, the author of these pages is as questing as anyone, and as vulnerable in his quest. He hasn't escaped the prison of the divided self; he understands that what will free him isn't any kind of nor-

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mal experience but something outside time, which we call, for want of a better term, waking up.

The paradox about waking up—I mean the ordinary kind of waking up that occurred to you and me this morning—is that you can't make it happen, yet it's inevitable. The same holds true spiritually. You can't wish, pray, beg, force, or meditate yourself awake. Even to detect that you are asleep is hard enough. Somehow, a tiny speck of awareness hints at another reality. With great fascination Alan Watts plays upon that small speck of doubt, here and in all his other books. As he sees it, the mind is in a whirl to escape itself and find itself at the same time. So every spiritual journey ends by closing the circle. The frightened mind that runs away from everyday terrors meets the seeking mind that wants a better world. When they join, illusion has been exhausted; it has no more tricks to play.

At that moment Heaven doesn't dawn, nor is there a benevolent God to embrace. There is something even better: wholeness. Self-division is healed. Once the mind has seen through all fear and all hope, it finds peace within itself, in a state of awareness beyond thought. This is the end point that *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, like all books of truth, cannot deliver neatly wrapped and tied. But such a book can symbolically draw the circle for us, which this one does splendidly. Anyone whose life needs a course correction would be fortunate to be guided by it. My life still is, some thirty years later.

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