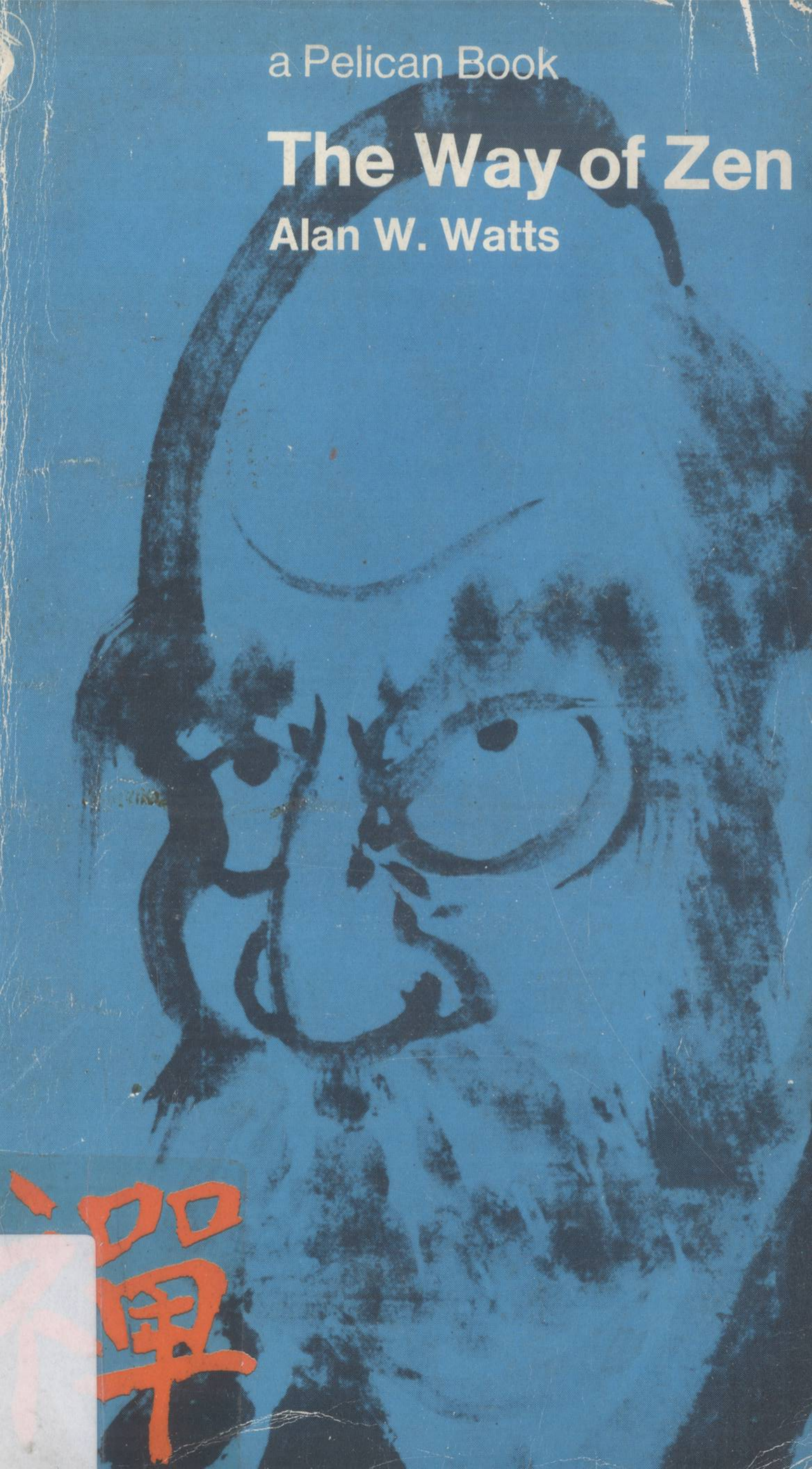


a Pelican Book

# The Way of Zen

Alan W. Watts

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ALAN W. WATTS

THE WAY OF ZEN

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE WAY OF ZEN

During the past thirty years Alan Watts became known through his many books as one of the most stimulating and unconventional philosophers of our time. He published over a dozen books on comparative philosophy and religion and was well known in the United States as a lecturer and teacher. He specialized in the interpretation of Eastern thought to the West, and particularly of the type of Buddhism known as Zen. His earlier book, *The Spirit of Zen*, was written at the age of twenty.

Alan Watts was born in England and went to the States in 1938, becoming in turn editor, minister and college professor. He was guest lecturer at Cambridge, Cornell, and Hawaii, and for some time was a religious counsellor at Northwestern University. He also spoke before the American Psychiatric Association, the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, and the medical staffs of American hospitals. He then became Dean of the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. Alan Watts died in 1973.

TO  
TIA, MARK, AND RICHARD  
WHO WILL UNDERSTAND IT ALL THE BETTER  
FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO READ IT

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## PREFACE

DURING the past twenty years there has been an extraordinary growth of interest in Zen Buddhism. Since the Second World War this interest has increased so much that it seems to be becoming a considerable force in the intellectual and artistic world of the West. It is connected, no doubt, with the prevalent enthusiasm for Japanese culture which is one of the constructive results of the late war, but which may amount to no more than a passing fashion. The deeper reason for this interest is that the viewpoint of Zen lies so close to the 'growing edge' of Western thought.

The more alarming and destructive aspects of Western civilization should not blind us to the fact that at this very time it is also in one of its most creative periods. Ideas and insights of the greatest fascination are appearing in some of the newer fields of Western science – in psychology and psychotherapy, in logic and the philosophy of science, in semantics and communications theory. Some of these developments might be due to suggestive influences from Asian philosophy, but on the whole I am inclined to feel that there is more of a parallelism than a direct influence. We are, however, becoming aware of the parallelism, and it promises an exchange of views which should be extremely stimulating.

Western thought has changed so rapidly in this century that we are in a state of considerable confusion. Not only are there serious difficulties of communication between the intellectual and the general public, but the course of our thinking and of our very history has seriously undermined the common-sense assumptions which lie at the roots of our social conventions and institutions. Familiar concepts of space, time, and motion, of nature and natural law, of history and social change, and of human personality itself have dissolved, and we find ourselves

adrift without landmarks in a universe which more and more resembles the Buddhist principle of the 'Great Void'. The various wisdoms of the West, religious, philosophical, and scientific, do not offer much guidance to the art of living in such a universe, and we find the prospects of making our way in so trackless an ocean of relativity rather frightening. For we are used to absolutes, to firm principles and laws to which we can cling for spiritual and psychological security.

This is why, I think, there is so much interest in a culturally productive way of life which, for some fifteen hundred years, has felt thoroughly at home in 'the Void', and which not only feels no terror for it but rather a positive delight. To use its own words, the situation of Zen has always been –

*Above, not a tile to cover the head;  
Below, not an inch of ground for the foot.*

Such language should not actually be so unfamiliar to us, were we truly prepared to accept the meaning of 'the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head'.

I am not in favour of 'importing' Zen from the Far East, for it has become deeply involved with cultural institutions which are quite foreign to us. But there is no doubt that there are things which we can learn, or unlearn, from it and apply in our own way. It has the special merit of a mode of expressing itself which is as intelligible – or perhaps as baffling – to the intellectual as to the illiterate, offering possibilities of communication which we have not explored. It has directness, verve, and humour, and a sense of both beauty and nonsense at once exasperating and delightful. But above all it has a way of being able to turn one's mind inside out, and dissolving what seemed to be the most oppressive human problems into questions like 'Why is a mouse when it spins?' At its heart there is a strong but completely unsentimental compassion for human beings suffering and perishing from their very attempts to save themselves.

There are many excellent books about Zen, though some of the best are out of print or otherwise difficult to obtain. But as yet no one – not even Professor Suzuki – has given us a comprehensive account of the subject which includes its historical background and its relation to Chinese and Indian ways of thought. The three volumes of Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* are an unsystematic collection of scholarly papers on various aspects of the subject, enormously useful for the advanced student but quite baffling to the general reader without an understanding of the general principles. His delightful *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* is rather narrow and specialized. It omits the essential information about the relation of Zen to Chinese Taoism and Indian Buddhism, and is in some respects rather more mystifying than it need be. His other works are studies of special aspects of Zen, all of which require general background and historical perspective.

R. H. Blyth's *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* is one of the best introductions available, but it is published only in Japan and, again, lacks the background information. As a series of rambling and marvellously perceptive observations, it makes no attempt to give an orderly presentation of the subject. My own *Spirit of Zen* is a popularization of Suzuki's earlier works, and besides being very unscholarly it is in many respects out of date and misleading, whatever merits it may have in the way of lucidity and simplicity. Christmas Humphrey's *Zen Buddhism*, published only in England, is likewise a popularization of Suzuki and, once more, does not really begin to put Zen in its cultural context. It is written in a clear and sprightly fashion, but the author finds identities between Buddhism and Theosophy which I feel to be highly questionable. Other studies of Zen by both Western and Asian authors are of a more specialized character, or are discussions of Zen apropos of something else – psychology, art, or cultural history.

In default, then, of a fundamental, orderly, and comprehensive account of the subject, it is no wonder that Western

impressions of Zen are somewhat confused, despite all the enthusiasm and interest which it has aroused. The problem, then, is to write such a book – and this I have tried to do since no one who understands the subject better than I seems willing or able to do so. Ideally, I suppose, such a work should be written by an accomplished and recognized Zen master. But at present no such person has sufficient command of English. Furthermore, when one speaks from within a tradition, and especially from within its institutional hierarchy, there is always apt to be a certain lack of perspective and grasp of the outsider's viewpoint. Again, one of the biggest obstacles to communication between Japanese Zen masters and Westerners is the absence of clarity as to difference of basic cultural premises. Both sides are so 'set in their ways' that they are unaware of the limitations of their means of communication.

Perhaps, then, the most appropriate author of such a work would be a Westerner who had spent some years under a Japanese master, going through the whole course of Zen training. Now from the standpoint of Western 'scientific scholarship' this would not do at all, for such a person would have become an 'enthusiast' and 'partisan' incapable of an objective and disinterested view. But, fortunately or unfortunately, Zen is above all an experience, non-verbal in character, which is simply inaccessible to the purely literary and scholarly approach. To know what Zen is, and especially what it is not, there is no alternative but to practise it, to experiment with it in the concrete so as to discover the meaning which underlies the words. Yet such Westerners as have undergone some of the special type of training followed in Rinzai Zen tend to become 'cagey' and uncommunicative on the principle that

*Those who know do not speak;  
Those who speak do not know.*

Although, however, they do not 'put up', they do not completely 'shut up'. On the one hand, they would love to share their understanding with others, but on the other hand, they

are convinced that words are ultimately futile, and are, furthermore, under an agreement not to discuss certain aspects of their training. They begin, therefore, to take the characteristically Asian attitude of 'Come and find out for yourself.' But the scientifically trained Westerner is, not without reason, a cautious and sceptical fellow who likes to know what he is 'getting into'. He is acutely conscious of the capacity of the mind for self-deception, for going into places where entrance is impossible without leaving one's critical perspective at the door. Asians tend so much to despise this attitude, and their Western devotees even more so, that they neglect to tell the scientific inquirer many things that are still well within the possibilities of human speech and intellectual understanding.

To write about Zen is, therefore, as problematic for the outside, 'objective' observer as for the inside, 'subjective' disciple. In varying situations I have found myself on both sides of the dilemma. I have associated and studied with the 'objective observers' and am convinced that, for all their virtues, they invariably miss the point and eat the menu instead of the dinner. I have also been on the inside of a traditional hierarchy - not Zen - and am equally convinced that from this position one does not know what dinner is being eaten. In such a position one becomes technically 'idiotic', which is to say, out of communication with those who do not belong to the same fold.

It is both dangerous and absurd for our world to be a group of communions mutually excommunicate. This is especially true of the great cultures of the East and the West, where the potentialities of communication are the richest, and the dangers of failure to communicate the worst. As one who has spent somewhat more than twenty years trying to interpret the East to the West, I have become increasingly certain that to interpret such a phenomenon as Zen there is a clear principle to be followed. On the one hand, it is necessary to be sympathetic and to experiment personally with the way of life to the limit of one's possibilities. On the other hand, one must



resist every temptation to 'join the organization' to become involved with its institutional commitments. In this friendly neutral position one is apt to be disowned by both sides. But, at the worst, one's misrepresentations provoke them to express themselves more clearly. For the relationship between two positions becomes far more clear when there is a third with which to compare them. Thus even if this study of Zen does no more than express a standpoint which is neither Zen nor anything Western, it will at least provide that third point of reference.

However, there can be no doubt that the essential standpoint of Zen refuses to be organized, or to be made the exclusive possession of any institution. If there is anything in this world which transcends the relativities of cultural conditioning, it is Zen – by whatever name it may be called. This is an excellent reason for Zen's not being institutionalized, and for the fact that many of its ancient exponents were 'universal individualists' who were never members of any Zen organization, and never sought the acknowledgment of any formal authority.

This, then, is my position with respect to Zen – and I feel I should be frank with the reader in a day when there is so much anxiety about people's credentials or 'quantifications'. I cannot represent myself as a Zenist, or even as a Buddhist, for this seems to me to be like trying to wrap up and label the sky. I cannot represent myself as a scientifically objective academician, for – with respect to Zen – this seems to me to be like studying birdsong in a collection of stuffed nightingales. I claim no rights to speak of Zen. I claim only the pleasure of having studied its literature and observed its art forms since I was hardly more than a boy, and of having had the delight of informal association with a number of Japanese and Chinese travellers of the same trackless way.

This book is intended both for the general reader and for the more serious student, and I trust that the former will be tolerant of the use of some technical terminology, a Chinese char-