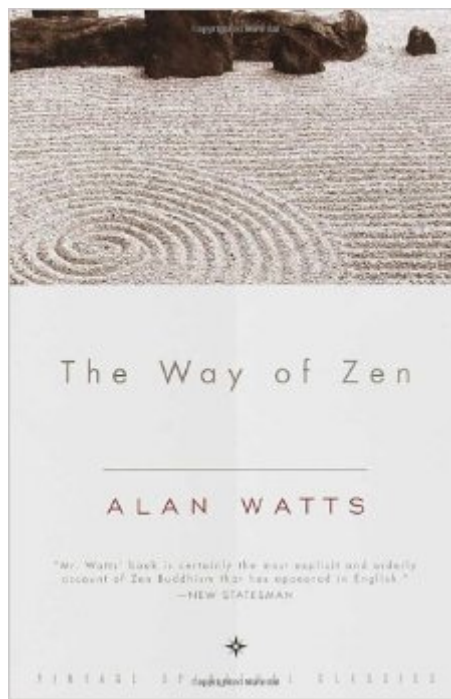


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# The Way Of Zen



## Synopsis

In his definitive introduction to Zen Buddhism, Alan Watts explains the principles and practices of this ancient religion to Western readers. With a rare combination of freshness and lucidity, he delves into the origins and history of Zen to explain what it means for the world today with incredible clarity. Watts saw Zen as one of the most precious gifts of Asia to the world, and in *The Way of Zen* he gives this gift to readers everywhere.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Receiving my first copy of *The Way of Zen* in 1959 set me on the path of exploring both the literature and the practices of Eastern traditions for the next 47 years. My original copy became so well-worn that I recently had to relegate it to archive status and purchase a new working copy. All these years later, this title still remains for me the classic work for Western understanding of Buddhism. I am amazed at the proliferation of books on the subject to be currently found on .com. Separating the wheat from the chaff can be a daunting challenge. Many interpretations of the Dharma, especially by Western authors, often seem to be tainted by naive New Age idealism on the one hand, or dry pedantry on the other. Although Watts was academically disciplined, reading the text with appropriate reflection can be simultaneously an intellectual and experiential endeavor (although not in the "how-to" sense). Watts wisely points out, with ample historical support from past Zen masters, that while so-called techniques for enlightenment may serve as transitional supports along the path, they ultimately lead to dead ends. *The Way of Zen*, despite some rather petty

criticisms by pedants and literalists over the years, has survived as one of the most lucid expositions of Zen specifically and Buddhism in general. Highly recommended...still.

This can be seen as a significant book in the transmission of the dharma to the Western world, even though, or perhaps especially because, it is written by a Westerner. Consistently admired since its first publication in 1957, and reprinted many times, *The Way of Zen* is that rarest of books, a popular and academic success. You will not read far before seeing why. Watts's style is reasoned and reasonable, clear and authoritative, but without a hint of affectation. Watts knows what he is talking about and to whom he is speaking. Because of his perspective between two worlds, he is, more than almost any other writer on Zen, able to match the ideas of the East to the mind of the West, and in doing so make the broader outlines of Zen as clear as the polished, dustless mirror. The book is divided into two parts, "Background and History" and "Principles and Practice," each with four chapters. There is a bibliography also divided into two parts, the first referring to original sources and second to general works on Zen in European languages. There are 16 pages of Chinese Notes in calligraphy keyed to the text, and an Index. "The Way" in the title refers to the "watercourse way" from Taoism, a philosophy to which Zen owes much, as Watts makes clear in the first two chapters, "The Philosophy of the Tao" and "The Origins of Buddhism." The first chapter is one of the best on Taoism that I have ever read, replete with insight and wisdom. Throughout, Watts expresses himself in an infectious style, even in the very scholarly chapters on the history of Buddhism where he traces Zen from its origin in India, through the Buddha under the Po tree, to Ch'an in China, and finally into Japan. Parallels between the unforced, natural way of Taoism and the spontaneity of Zen Buddhism are explored in a most convincing and engaging manner. Along the way we learn a little about Hinduism and Confucianism. The chapters on the principles and practices of Zen, comprising a goodly portion of the book are nothing short of marvelous, full of wit and sly observations, revealing Watts's thorough knowledge of Zen and his deep appreciation. Here are some examples of Watts at work: Referring obliquely to the rise of communism (a word he never uses in the book) he writes, "When the throne of the Absolute is left vacant, the relative usurps it..." (p. 11) Perhaps Watts is also indicating why he believes that humanism is not a complete answer. On the cosmology of the Tao: "...the natural universe works mainly according to the principles of growth...If the universe were made, there would of course be someone who knows it is made..." He adds, "...the Tao does not how it produces the universe..." (pp. 16-17) "Since opposed principles, or ideologies, are irreconcilable, wars fought over principle will be wars of mutual annihilation. But wars fought for simple greed will be far less destructive, because the aggressor will be careful not to destroy what

he is fighting to capture." (pp. 29-30)"Hindu philosophy has not made the mistake of imagining that one can make an informative, factual, and positive statement about the ultimate reality." (p, 34)"Buddhism has frequently compared the course of time to the apparent motion of a wave, wherein the actual water only moves up and down, creating the illusion of a of water moving over the surface. It is a similar illusion that there is a constant moving through successive experiences, constituting a link between them in such a way that the youth becomes the man who becomes the graybeard who becomes the corpse." (p. 123)In his exploration of koans used by the Rinzai School of Zen, it becomes clear that one of the purposes of the koan is to put doubt into the mind of the young aspirant that he knows anything at all. From that redoubtable position, real learning can begin. I was reminded of a saying attributed to baseball's Earl Weaver, the very successful manager of the Baltimore Orioles in their glory years: "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."Here is a story from the Ch'uan Teng Lu, told by Watts about "a fascinating encounter between Tao-hsin and the sage Fa-yung, who lived in a lonely temple on Mount Niu-t'ou, and was so holy that the birds used to bring him offerings of flowers. As the two men were talking, a wild animal roared close by, and Tao-hsin jumped. Fa-yung commented, --referring, of course, to the instinctive (klesa) of fright. Shortly afterwards, while he was for a moment unobserved, Tao-hsin wrote the Chinese character for on the rock where Fa-yung was accustomed to sit. When Fa-yung returned to sit down again, he saw the sacred name and hesitated to sit. said Tao-hsin, At this remark Fa-yung was fully awakened...and the birds never brought any more flowers." (pp. 89-90).While this is an excellent introduction to Zen--and more--for the educated person, it is especially a delight for those of you who have already read a few books on Zen. There is no other book that I know of that goes as deeply into Zen as agreeably as does *The Way of Zen*--Dennis Littrell, author of "Yoga: Sacred and Profane (Beyond Hatha Yoga)"

Generally speaking, Watts doesn't appeal to new-age crystal fairies, channelers, and so forth, and if you prefer your Zen texts all poetical and mysterious, then this book isn't for you; but if you want a treatment of Zen as an important, credible and viable philosophical tradition, then you'll like this book. It's not an easy read, but this is good, solid, hardheaded Watts.

Scan the "Eastern Philosophy" racks at your local bookstore and you'll see the problem--books with titles like "The Tao of Love and Relationships" or "The Zen of Career Advancement." Much of the literature on eastern philosophy written by westerners is distorted as it is re-focused through the prism ("prison," some would argue) of western thought and language. Alan Watts appreciates and

addresses these difficulties in *The Way of Zen*, an excellent introduction to the Zen Buddhism. Watts explores Zen's historical background, tracing it from Buddhism's migration from India to China, where it absorbed elements of Confucian and Taoist thought, to its final development in Japan. The second half of the book describes Zen's underlying principles and its practices, such as the absence of "self" and the futility of purpose. Rich in scholarly detail, yet accessible to the lay reader, *The Way of Zen*, is remarkable in its lucidity. Watts uses analogies and allusions culled from daily life to illustrate Zen principles and does much to clear up western misconceptions about Zen thought. He also warns of the difficulties many westerners face trying to understand Zen. With the English language's clear separation between the observer and the observed, the action and the actor and its rigid division of time into past, present and future, Zen thought often strikes westerners as mystical or moronic. While Watts may champion Zen, he never stoops to mere cheer-leading. Instead he has produced a highly readable book that explains and de-mystifies Zen.

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