

The Value of Psychotic Experience

by Alan Watts

I think most of you know from the announcement of this series of seminars and workshops during the summer, they're entitled 'The Value of Psychotic Experience.' And many people who are interested in an entirely new approach to problems of what have hitherto been called mental health are participating in these seminars and workshops, and doing something which is extremely dangerous and in a way revolutionary. For this reason:

We are living in a world where deviant opinions about religion are no longer dangerous, because no one takes religion seriously, and therefore you can be like Bishop Pike and question the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the reality of the virgin birth, and the physical resurrection of Jesus, and still remain a bishop in good standing. But what you can't get away with today, or at least you have great difficulty in getting away with is psychiatric heresy. Because psychiatry is taken seriously, and indeed, I would like to draw a parallel between today and the Middle Ages in the respect of this whole question.

When we go back to the days of the Spanish Inquisition, we must remember that the professor of theology at the University of Seville has the same kind of social prestige and intellectual standing that today would be enjoyed by the professor of pathology at Stanford Medical School. And you must bear in mind that this theologian, like the professor of pathology today, is a man of good will. Intensely interested in human welfare. He didn't merely opine; that professor of theology KNEW that anybody who had heretical religious views would suffer everlasting agony of the most appalling kind. And some of you should read the imaginative descriptions of the sufferings of Hell, written not only in the Middle Ages, but in quite recent times by men of intense intellectual acumen. And therefore out of real merciful motivation, the Inquisitors thought that it was the best thing they could do to torture heresy out of those who held it. Worse still, heresy was infectious, and would contaminate other people and put them in this immortal danger. And so with the best motivations imaginable, they used the thumbscrew, the rack, the iron maiden, the leaded cat-of-nine-tails, and finally the stake to get these people to come to their senses, because nothing else seemed to be available.

Today, serious heresy, and rather peculiarly in the United States, is a deviant state of consciousness. Not so much deviant opinions as having a kind of experience which is different from 'regular' experience. And as Ronald Lang, who is going to participate in this series, has so well pointed out, we are taught what experiences are permissible in the same way we are taught what gestures, what manners, what behavior is permissible and socially acceptable. And therefore, if a person has so-called 'strange' experiences, and endeavors to communicate these experiences--because naturally one talks about what one feels--and endeavors to communicate these experiences to other people, he is looked at in a very odd way and asked 'are you feeling all right?' Because people feel distinctly uncomfortable when they realize they are in the presence of someone who is experiencing the world in a rather different way from themselves. They call in question as to whether this person is indeed human. They look like a human being, but because the state of experience is so different, you wonder whether they really are. And you get the kind of--the same kind of queasy feeling

inside as you would get if, for the sake of example, you were to encounter a very beautiful girl, very formally dressed, and you were introduced, and in order to shake hands, she removed her glove, and you found in your hand the claw of a large bird. That would be spooky, wouldn't it?

Or let's suppose that you were looking at a rose. And you looked down in the middle where the petals are closed, and you suddenly saw them open like lips, and the rose addressed you and said 'good morning.' You would feel something uncanny was going on. And in rather the same way, in an every day kind of circumstance, when you are sitting in a bar drinking, and you find you have a drunk next to you. And he tells you, 'undistinguishable drunken ranting' and you sort of move your stool a little ways away from this man, because he's become in some way what we mean by nonhuman. Now, we understand the drunk; we know what's the matter with him, and it'll wear off. But when quite unaccountably, a person gives representation that he's suddenly got the feeling that he's living in backwards time, or that everybody seems to be separated from him by a huge sheet of glass. Or that he's suddenly seeing everything in unbelievably detailed moving colors. We say, 'well that's not normal. Therefore there must be something wrong with you.' And the fact that we have such an enormous percentage of the population of this country in mental institutions is a thing we may have to look at from a very different point of view, not that there may be a high incidence of mental sickness, but that there may be a high incidence of intolerance of variations of consciousness.

Now in Arabic countries, where the Islamic religion prevails, a person whom we would define as mentally deranged is regarded with a certain respect. The village idiot is looked upon with reverence because it is said his soul is not with his body, it is with Allah. And because his soul is with Allah, you must respect this body and care for it, not as something that is to be sort of swept away and put out of sight, but as something of a reminder that a man can still be living on Earth while his soul is in Heaven. Very different point of view. Also in India, there is a certain difference in attitude to people who would be called nuts, because there is a poem--an ancient poem of the Hindus-- which says 'sometimes naked, sometimes mad, now's a scholar, now's a fool, thus they appear on Earth as free men.'

But you see, we in our attitude to this sort of behavior, which is essentially in its first inception harmless, these people are talking what we regard to be nonsense. And to be experienced in nonsense. We feel threatened by that, because we are not secure in ourselves. A very secure person can adapt himself with amazing speed to different kinds of communication. In foreign countries, for example, where you don't speak the language of the people you are staying with, if you don't feel ashamed of this, you can set up an enormous degree of communication with other people through gesture and even something most surprising, people can communicate with each other by simply talking. You can get a lot across to people by talking intelligent nonsense, by, as it were, imitating a foreign language; speaking like it sounds. You can communicate feelings, emotions, like and dislike of this, that and the other; very simply. But if you are rigid and are not willing to do this type of playing, then you feel threatened by anybody who communicates with you in a funny way. And so this rigidity sets up a kind of vicious circle. The minute, in other words, someone makes an unusual communication to you about an unusual state of consciousness, and you back off, the individual wonders 'is there something wrong with me? I don't seem to be understood by anyone.' Or he may wonder 'what's going on? Has everybody else suddenly gone crazy?' And then if he feels that he gets frightened, and to the degree that he gets more frightened, he gets more defensive, and eventually land up with being catatonic, which is a person who simply doesn't move. And so then what we do is we whiffle him off to an institution, where he is captured by the inquisitors. This is a very special priesthood. And they have all the special marks that priesthoods have always had. They have a special vestment. Like the Catholic priest at mass wears a *, the mental doctor, like every physician, wears a long white coat, and may carry something that corresponds, shall we say, so a stole, which is a stethoscope around his neck. He will then, under his authority, which is often in total defiance of every conceivable civil liberty, will incarcerate

this incomprehensible person, and as Lang has pointed out, he undergoes a ritual of dehumanization. And he's put away. And because the hospitals are so crowded with people of this kind, he's going to get very little attention. And it's very difficult to know, when you get attention, how to work with it.

You get into this Kafka-esque situation which you get, say, in the state of California, if you are sent to such an institute as Vacaville prison, which is as you drive on the highway from San Francisco to Sacramento, you will encounter Vacaville about halfway between. You will see a great sign which will say 'California State Medical Facility.' The state of California is famous for circumlocution. When you go underneath a low bridge, instead of saying 'Low Bridge,' it says 'Impaired Vertical Clearance.' Or when you're going to cross a toll bridge, instead of saying, plainly, 'Toll Bridge,' it says 'Entering Vehicular Crossing.' And when it should be saying, plainly, 'Prison,' it says either 'California State Medical Facility,' or 'California State Correctional Facility,' as it does as Soledad. Now Vacaville is a place where people get sent on what they call a one- to ten-year sentence. And there is a supervising psychiatric medical sort of social service staff there, who examine the inmates once in a while because they have such a large number. It's a maximum security prison, much more ringed around with defences than even San Quentin. I went there to lecture to the inmates some time ago. They wanted someone to talk to them about meditation and yoga, and one of the inmates took me aside--a very clean-cut all-American boy. And he had been put in there probably for smoking pot; I'm not absolutely sure in my memory what the offense was. He said 'You know, I am very puzzled about this place. I really want to go straight and get out and get a job and live like an ordinary person.' He said 'I think they don't know how to go about it. I've just been refused release; I went up before the committee; I talked to them. But I don't know what the rules of the game are. And incidentally, the members of the committee don't either.'

So we have these situation, you see, of confusion. So that when a person goes into a mental hospital and feels first of all perhaps that he should try to sort himself out and talk reasonably with the physician. There is introduced into the communications system between them a fundamental element of fear and mistrust. Because I could talk to any individual if I were malicious and interpret every sane remark you make as something deeply sinister; that would simply exhibit my own paranoia. And the psychiatrist can very easily get paranoid, because the system he is asked to represent, officially is paranoid. I talked with a psychiatrist in England just a few weeks ago. One of the most charming women I've come across, an older woman, very intelligent, quite beautiful, very reasonable. And she was discussing with me the problem of the LSD psychosis. I asked her what sort of treatments they were using, and all sorts of questions about that, and she appeared at first to be a little on the defensive about it. We got onto the subject of the experience of what is officially called 'depersonalization,' where you feel that you and your experience--your sensory experience--that is to say all that you do experience: the people, the things, the animals, the buildings around you--that it's all one. I said 'do you call this a hallucination? After all,' I said, 'it fits the facts of science, of biophysics, of ecology, of biology, and much better than our ordinary normal experience fits it.' She said 'that's not my problem.' She said 'that may be true, but I am employed by a society which feels that it ought to maintain a certain average kind of normal experience, and my job is to restore people to what society considers normal consciousness. I have no alternative but to leave it at that.'

So, then. When someone is introduced into this situation, and it's very difficult to get attention, you feel terrified. The mental hospital, often in its very architecture, suggests some of the great visions of madness, of-- You know that feeling of-- The corridors of the mind. If you got lost in a maze and you couldn't get back. You're not quite sure who you are, or whether your father and mother are your real father and mother, or whether in the next ten minutes you're still going to remember how to speak English. You feel very lost. And the mental hospital in its architecture and everything represents that situation. Endless corridors, all the same. Which one are you in? Where are you? Will you ever get out? And it goes on monotonously, day after day after day after day after day. And someone who talks to you occasionally doesn't have a straight look in his eye. He doesn't see you as quite human. He looks at you as if you're weird. What are you to do?

The best thing to do is get violent, if you really want to get out. Well then they say that's proof that you're crazy. And then as you get more violent, they put you off by yourself, and the only alternative you have, the only way of expressing yourself is to throw shit at the walls. Then they say, 'well, that's conclusive. The person isn't human.'

Well, the question has been raised a great deal in the last few days on the television, as to whether this is a sick society. And I have listened to a perfectly beautiful psychoanalyst with a thick German accent. Oh, marvelous things! 'Eet ees quite obvious dat society is quite hopeless, you zee.' And I have listened to four red-blooded Americans saying 'most people in this society are good people, and it's a GOOD society, but we have a very sick minority.'

Now, what I want to do in--certainly this first part of the seminar--is to call in question, very fundamentally, all of our basic ideas about what is sickness, what is health, what is sanity, what is insanity. Because I think we have to begin from this position of humility; that we really don't know. It's reported that shortly before he died, Robert Oppenheimer, looking at the picture of technology, especially nuclear technology, said 'I'm afraid it's perfectly obvious that the world is going to hell.' It's going to destroy itself, it's on collision course. The only way in which it might not go to hell is that we do not try to prevent it from doing so. Think that one over. Because it can well be argued that the major troublemakers in the world today are those people with good intentions. Like the professor of theology, University of Seville, professor of psychiatry at wherever you will. The idea that we know who is sick, who is wrong. Now, we are living in a political situation right now where a most fantastic thing is occurring. Everybody knows what they're against; nobody knows what they're for. Because nobody is thinking in terms anymore of what would be a great style of life. The reason we have poverty is that we have no imagination. There's no earthly reason; there's no physical, technical reason for there being any poverty at all anywhere. But you see, there are a great many people accumulating what they think is vast wealth, but it's only money. They don't know how to use it, they don't know how to enjoy it, because they have no imagination.

I'm announcing not the date, but the intention of conducting a seminar for extremely rich people entitled 'Are You Rich and Miserable?' because you very probably are. Some aren't, but most are. Now the thing is that we are living in this situation where everybody knows what they're against, even if they say 'I'm against the war in Vietnam. I am against discrimination against colored people, or against any different race than the discolored race,' and so on. Yeah, so what? But it's not enough to feel like that; that's nothing. You must have some completely concrete vision of what you would like, and therefore I'm making a serious proposition that everybody who goes into college should as an entrance examination have the task of writing an essay on his idea of heaven, in which he is asked to be absolutely specific. He is not allowed, for example, to say 'I would like to have a very beautiful girl to live with.' What do you mean by a beautiful girl? Exactly how, and in what way? Specifically. You know, down to the last wiggle of the hips, and down to every kind of expression of character and socialbility and her interests and all. Be specific! And about everything like that. 'I would like a beautiful house to live in.' Just what exactly do you mean by a beautiful house? Well you've suddenly got to study architecture. You see, and finally, this preliminary essay on 'My Idea of Heaven' turns into his doctoral dissertation. So in a situation where we all know what we're against, and we don't know what we're for, then we know WHO we're against. We're defining all sorts of people as nonhuman. We say they're totally irrational. They're totally stupid. People will say, 'oh, those niggers, they're completely uneducated, they'll never learn a thing, there's nothing you can do about it, they're hopeless, get rid of them.' The Birchers are saying the same sort of thing. Other people, the liberals are saying the same thing about the Birchers. 'They're stupid, get rid of them.' The only result, then, the only thing anybody can think of in this sort of situation is 'get your gun.' And this sets up a vicious circle, because everybody else gets his gun. And the point from which we have to begin, then, is that we don't know who is healthy and who is sick. Who is right and who is wrong. And furthermore, we have to start, I think, from the assumption that because we don't know, there isn't anything we can do about it.

There's a Turkish proverb that I like to quote: 'He who sleeps on the floor cannot fall out of bed.' Therefore, we should make it a beginning--a basic assumption about life that even supposing you could improve society, and you could improve yourself, you were never sure that the direction you moved it in would be an improvement.

A Chinese story, kind of a Taoistic story about a farmer. One day, his horse ran away, and all the neighbors gathered in the evening and said 'that's too bad.' He said 'maybe.' Next day, the horse came back and brought with it seven wild horses. 'Wow!' they said, 'Aren't you lucky!' He said 'maybe.' He next day, his son grappled with one of these wild horses and tried to break it in, and he got thrown and broke his leg. And all the neighbors said 'oh, that's too bad that your son broke his leg.' He said, 'maybe.' The next day, the conscription officers came around, gathering young men for the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. And the visitors all came around and said 'Isn't that great! Your son got out.' He said, 'maybe.'

You see, you never really know in which direction progress lies. And this is today a fantastic problem for geneticists. They genetecists, you know, because they think they are within some degree of controlling the DNA and RNA code, believe that it is really possible perhaps to breed the kind of human beings that we ought to have. And they say 'hooray!' But they think one moment and they think 'ah-ah-ah-ah-ah, but what kind of human being?' So they're very worried. And just a little while ago, a national committee of graduate students and geneticists had a meeting at the University of California and the asked a group of psychologists, theologans and philosophers to come and reason with them about this and give them some insight. And I was included. That means that they are REALLY desperate. So I said 'I'll tell you what, the only thing you can do is to be quite sure that you keep a vast variety of different kinds of human beings, because you never know what's going to happen next. And therefore we need an enormous, shall I say, varied battery of different kinds of human intelligence and resources and abilities. So that there will always be some kind of person available for any emergency that might turn up. So you see, there's a total fallacy in the idea of preaching to people. This is why I abandoned the ministries, I've often said, not because the church didn't practice what it preached, but because it preached. Because you cannot tell people what sort of pattern of life they ought to have, because if they followed your advice, you might have a breed of monsters. Look at it from the point of view that the human race is a breed of monsters.

I was thinking about it this afternoon, driving down from Monterey to here, and looking at the freeways, and all these little cars going along them, and I was wondering if I considered that the planet was a physical body like my own, whether I might not feel that this was some sort of an invasion of weird bacteria that were eating me up. Whether it may be that the birds and the bees and the flowers--animals in general--were a kind of healthy bacteria. You know, bees and birds sort of wander about, generally mix in with the forest and the fields and carry on a rather disorganized but very interesting pattern of life, whereas human beings cut straight lines across everything. Railways. They cover themselves with junk. A bird may have a little nest, but it doesn't have to surround itself with automobiles and books and buildings and phonograph records and universities and clutter up the whole landscape with a lot of bric- a-brac. Human beings pride themselves on this. 'You see, this is culture!' This is a great achievement. Build a building, you know? It's all you can get money for. You can't get money for professors, but you can get them for new buildings. So we cover the Earth with clutter. And so the Earth might feel as if we might feel if suddenly we got a disease which instead of leaving us soft-skinned, covered us with crystalline scabs, and this would be proliferating all over the place--a pox! Are we a pox on the planet? Don't be too sure that we're not. Consider simply this:

There is a good argument--keep in mind I'm saying these things to provoke you, to make you a little insane by being in doubt of all the assumptions which you think are firmly true. It is quite possible, you see, that

the whole enterprise of man to control events on the Earth by his conscious intelligence, by his language, by his mathematics, and by his science is a disaster. We say look at his successes, look how much disease we have cured. Look how much hunger has been abolished. Look how we have raised the standard of living. Yeah. But in how long a time?

Well, even if we say this started with the dawn of known history, it's a tiny little fragment of time, as compared with the time in which the human species has existed. And if it's the Industrial Revolution, it narrows down to the teeniest, weeniest little bit of time. How do we know this is progress? How do we know that this is a success? It may be a disaster of unimaginable proportions. It may be. But the truth is, we don't know. Of course, it could be possible, that every star in the heavens was once a planet, and that planet developed intelligent life, which in due course discovered the secrets of atomic energy, blew itself up into a chain reaction, and as it exploded throughout various masses which began in due course to spin around it, became planets, and after a while developed intelligent life. After millions of years, as the central star started to cool off, they blew themselves up in turn, and that's the way the thing goes on. That's of course the theory of the Hindus. Not literally, but they do have the theory, you see, that life, every manifestation of the universe, begins in a glorious way, and then it deteriorates. But then everything does. Isn't everything always falling apart and getting older and fading out? Why shouldn't various species, why shouldn't various planets, why shouldn't various universes be going through the same course?

You see, that's a totally upside-down view in respect to our common sense. We think everything ought to be growing and improving and getting better and better and better and better and better and better. Look at it the other way around, it might be quite different. Then there's another thought. We know that the truth, the way things are is an interaction, or better, transaction between the physical world and our sense organs, and that therefore, what we know as existence is a relationship. It is the way certain what we will call for the moment electrical vibrations make impression upon sense organs of a certain structure. Now that's a limited way of talking about it, but it will do for the moment. Therefore, according to the structure of the sense organs, the vibrations will appear of be manifested in different ways. In other words, I can move my finger like this, and if it happens to pluck the string of a violin, it will go 'plunk!' In which case my finger and its motion will be manifested as 'plunk!' But if it should so happen that I should strike the string of a bass fiddle, it will go, 'bunggggg' and so the finger will be 'bunggggg' But if the same motion should strike the skin of a drum, 'thunk,' so the finger will be 'thunk,' now what is that motion truly? It's whatever it interacts with. If it goes across somebody else's skin, it'll be something I can't make a noise about. It'd be a feeling. If it does it in front of an eye, it will be a motion.

So depending on the structure of shall we say for the moment the receptor organs, so will the reality be. Now behind the receptor organs--the senses are not at all simple--behind the senses they are inseparable from an extraordinarily complex neurological structure. And not only that, but a system of cultural standards as to what events are to be noticed and what events are to be ignored. What is important for a certain reason such as survival, and what is unimportant, and therefore we further modify the selectivity of the sense organs and of the nervous system as a whole with a selective system of what is culturally accepted as real or unreal, important or unimportant.

So we end up you see, with the possibility that so complex a selective system may have a great many variations, and that people that we call crazy have a different system of evaluation. They may have a difference of neural structure, as would obviously be the case if there were lesions caused by syphilis, or by brain tumors. But what about something not quite at that level, but at the level of the selectivities they imply which would correspond to what I call social conditioning. Now we know the proverb that genius is to madness 'cross the line. And how do we know whether a certain modification in the structure of the whole sensory system is a sickness or whether it is a growing edge--some kind of improvement in the human being. Well we have certain very, very rough standards which we apply to this, but we can never be quite

sure because what we call sanity is mob rule. Sanity is simply the vote of organisms that recognize themselves to be humans and they get together and say 'Well, the way we see it is the way it is.' And you will remember in Kipling's story in the 'Jungle Book' called 'Cause Hunting' how the monkeys, the bandiloot are laughed at because every once in a while they get together in a meeting and shout 'We all say so, so it must be true!'

But herein you see lie the deepest political problems. How is the majority to tolerate, to absorb, to evaluate a minority? It's an academic problem. We have standards as to who are sound scholars, reliable scientists--we give them a PhD. And they all get together and uphold the standards. But then they suddenly realize that they're getting a little narrow and that things aren't going on, and suddenly somebody says one day 'Old so-and-so, who we always thought was quite mad and very, very unorthodox has suddenly come up with an idea that we've all got to think about.' So one would say that every university faculty has to include in its membership at least five percent screwballs. Every culture has to tolerate within its domain a lot of weird people. Now there's no possibility that everybody in the United States is going to be a hippie. But the fact that a large number of young people are hippies should be a matter of congratulations, even if you don't want to live that way yourself. Not to mention the various racial variations that we have among us: negroes, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and so forth. All this is exceedingly important, because as I said to the geneticists, this preserves variety. And a culture which is insecure in itself--I'm getting back to a sort of starting point--cannot tolerate this.

Now in England as I remember it, they were much more secure. When I was a boy, 15 years old, in a very orthodox Church of England school, I announced that I was a Buddhist. Nobody turned a hair. Here, if somebody announces that he's something strange, they have to go before the principal, and there's a big problem, and the FBI is brought in, and this, that, and the other. But they said 'Jolly wot, the man's a buhddist!' And positively encouraged me in my deviant interest, and gave me the first prize in the divinity class. Now exactly the same kind of relaxed attitude is necessary here.

Let's ask a few questions that don't need answers. Is the American family such a drag that a few kids living in free-love communes are a fundamental threat to it and will pervert all our nice boys and girls to live that way? Are American universities so boring that a few students who drop out and form their own univerisities are a threat to the total system and will pervert all the other nice children in there? Are a few kids going around in elegant beards and long hair going to turn all our boys into weirdos?

Say, I had a funny experience. When I was in England I attended services at Westminster Abbey. I took my wife there because I really wanted to her to see this thing, because it's the heart and soul of British establishment. The dean of Westminster is like the Dali Lama almost. They had this very elegant victorian service--beautiful vestments, choir and everything--and as they were coming out in procession, the choir came first, which were little boys with proper haircuts and surplices. A and red caps on, there were a number of older boys wearing surplices--the special kind of surplice that is worn by its color of a British public school. Y'know, the public schools are not public schools, they're very private schools, very exclusive schools, and the school of Westminster is one of the top, like Eaton or Harrow. Suddenly, these boys in surplices turn up, with these enormous Beatles haircuts whishing all over the place. I couldn't believe my eyes, because I used to be a King's Scholar, and in our day, we were very proper and all wore mortarboards over short hair. And then behind these surpliced boys, there were the commoners of the school, who were not King's Scholars and therefore didn't wear surplices, but wore striped black pants, black coats, wing collars and black ties. And we always used to walk in procession as we came out, like this, but here were these boys with a similar hairdo coming out. .apparent visual joke here that I guess you'd have to be there to get, but very funny, it would seemA My god, what's going on? This is Westminster Abbey! But the dean of Westminster doesn't turn a hair, he takes it all in stride. He's perfectly secure. He

knows he is who he is. He knows it's ordained by Jesus Christ and everything else and it's all right, and if you want to come in and do something different, it's all right.

And that is the attitude we have to have in regard to everything deviant, psychotic, and weird. Because we are not sure what's right, who's sane, which end is up. In a relativistic universe, you don't cling to anything, you learn to swim. And you know what swimming is. It's a kind of relaxed attitude to the water, in which you don't keep yourself afloat by holding the water, but by a certain giving to it, and it's just the same with relationships to people all around.

ALAN WATTS: THE VALUE OF PSYCHOTIC EXPERIENCE, PART 2

Zen has attracted attention over the years, since 1927, when Dr. Daisetz Suzuki first published his essays in Zen Buddhism, and he had a very odd fascination with Westerners. To begin with, very many intelligent Western people were becoming--had already become, dissatisfied with the standard brands of their own religions, and this dissatisfaction had of course begun to take place quite seriously towards the close of the 19th century, and at that time, we began to be exposed to Oriental philosophy or religion, whatever you want to call it, because the great scholars like Maxmilla, •Riese DavidsÙ and so on were translating the texts of Buddhism and Hinduism. And already in 1848, the Jesuit had translated the Tao Te Ching, the Taoist texts from China into French, and translations into English then became available.

What happened was rather curious, because we were receiving Oriental tradition on a far higher level of sophistication than we were receiving the Christian or the Jewish traditions. The average person was exposed to an extremely low level of Christianity, and therefore immediately compared this to the highest level of Hinduism and Buddhism, much to the detriment of the former, because you could no go into your parish church, even if you lived in a very good neighborhood, even in a university neighborhood and find Meister Eckhart for sale on the entrance table. Nor even would you find some Thomas Aquinas. You found wretched little tracts. And so the comparison was overwhelming. It wasn't really fair for the Christian tradition, but that's what happened. Then something else happened, which was that in the year 1875, a strange Russian woman by the name of H.P. Blavatsky• founded the Theosophical Society, whose doctrines and literature were a fantastic hodgepodge of the Western occult tradition, a great deal of Hindu and Buddhist lore, a smattering of Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, but it all was very romantic, and presuppose that the adepts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and so forth were very high order initiates. Supermen. The masters. And they had their secret lodges in the vastness of the Himalayas, and even such places as the Andes, and they were rather inaccessible, because they were in possession of the most dangerous secrets of occult power. But they every now and then felt safe to send an emissary out into the world to teach the ancient doctrine of liberation to mankind.

And so the West, through this, got an extremely glamorous impression of what Oriental wisdom might be. And I remember the media in which I found myself involved in England when Dr. Suzuki first came around was essentially theosophical in its orientation. They expected Dr Suzuki to be a master in that sense, in that theosophical sense, or if not quite that, then at least in touch with those who were. And the whole idea of the Zen master, the way the whole word 'master' got attached to a teacher of Zen carried with it this theosophical flavor, and also a certain flavor which the Theosophical Society picked up from India where the great guru is somebody enormously revered. People would travel for hundreds of miles just to look at him, to have what is called Tao-Shan•, or 'view' of someone like Shri Arabindo• or Shri Ramana Maharshi or the current Maharshi, or it would be Shri Rama Krishna or Amandani, who's a lady guru, and there's always the feeling that these people have tremendous powers. And so this is what was expected by many people from Zen masters. But the interesting thing about Zen masters is they're not like that. They're very human. And they wouldn't deign to perform a miracle. I got to know about Zen masters through my first

wife, because when she was an adolescent about 14 years old, she went to Japan, and they lived close to the great monastery of Nonzengi where the master in charge was a very brilliant master by the name of Nonshinkan. He was an old man, and he was-- The man who is appointed to be the roshi or the teacher of Nonzengi of Kyoto was always considered to be just about tops of the whole bunch. We've had the present master, Shibayama Roshi visiting the United States recently. And he used to sit around with her and he'd get a catalog of all the famous sumo wrestlers, who were enormously fat. They have to eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat rice, because the whole art depends on their weight. But they're very handsome. And he used to thumb them through sitting next to this little girl and pick out husbands for her. And then he would have nose-picking contests with her. Y'know, they weren't exactly real, but they'd make sort of like picking their noses and flicking the snots at each other.

So you mustn't expect the Zen master to be like the Pope. They can come on very dignified when necessary, but there's always something about them which is fundamentally lacking in seriousness. Even though they may be well-endowed with sincerity. They're two quite different qualities. They are extraordinarily interesting people, as are their students, in the context of Japanese culture. Japanese culture is terribly uptight, because the Japanese are very emotional people, underneath. Tremendously passionate. But they have to hold that in, because they live in a crowded country, and space is the most valuable thing in Japan, especially living space, because 80% of the territory is uninhabitable. It's forested mountains, and you can't grow anything there, you can't make much of a city. So they're all crowded into 20% of the country. And so this feeling of being pressed in by other people is-- They try to handle it by exquisite politeness, and by orderly behavior by very strong convention. But this makes the average Japanese man and woman kind of nervous. When a Japanese giggles, it's a sign not of being amused, but of being embarrassed. And you'll find all sorts of funny attitudes, such as people putting their hands over their mouths when they're eating, or to conceal a giggle.

And they're tremendously hung up on social indebtedness, whether it's a debt to the emperor, or whether it's a debt to your fathers and mothers, or whether it's a debt to someone in the family, or whether it's a debt to friends whom you visited and they entertained you. Well, you always take gifts with you when you go, but then that still embarrasses your friends to whom you take the gifts, because they have to consider the next time they go to visit you, they've got to take gifts of the same value. And you wouldn't believe what goes on.

So actually, what Zen is in Japan is a release from Japanese culture. It is getting rid of the hang-ups, but doing it in such a way as not to embarrass the rest of society. So the Zen monks come on as if they're pretty stiff; when they walk out in the street, they almost look like soldiers. When they walk, they stride, they don't shuffle, like other Japanese do. They don't giggle, ever. They have no need to. Because the process of their discipline has liberated them from the social conventions. Only they are very tactful and don't rush out like, you know, a bunch of hippies or something and say 'Look, we're liberated!' They pretend they're the very pillars of society.

So they follow a tradition which is very ancient, which is that in every society, there is an inner group who doesn't believe in the fairy stories they've been told. He sees through. To whom everything becomes completely transparent. You see what games people are playing. And you don't despise them for that. You see, they're involved in that because of their whole conditioning. But you see through all those games. The game--the me game--that everybody is playing is of course the survival game. And we think-- We've got our minds rigged about this in such a way that we live in constant dread of sickness or of death or of loss of property or status. Well, so what? Supposing you do. Everybody's going to die someday. It's a little harder to take when you're 20 than when you're 50, but if you are entirely hung up on the idea that YOU are this particular expression of the universe and that only, you haven't been properly educated. If you were awake, you would understand that you were the whole universe, pretending, projecting itself at a point called here

and now, in the form of the human organism. And you would understand that very clearly, not just as an idea, but as an actual vivid sensation, just the same way you know you're sitting in this room. And so the object of Zen, as of other ways of liberation--Taoism, Hinduism; you'll find it even in Christianity in the Eastern Orthodox Church; Islam--the object of these ways of liberation is to bring you to a vivid, perfectly clear, I would say even sensuous realization of your true identity as a temporary coming on and going off, coming on and going off, or vibration as waves, of what there is, and always is, of the famous E which equals MC squared. And you are that. You will be that, and always will be that--accept that. This whatever it is-- which, then no which, then which--it doesn't operate in time. Time is a more or less human illusion. We will discover this to be so in our experiments. You will discover that there is only now, and there never was anything but now and never will be anything but now, and now is eternity.

Now Zen is a little bit unlike the rest of Hinduism and Buddhism in that it's summed up in these four principles: It's a special transmission of the Buddhist enlightenment outside the scriptures. It does not depend on words or letters. It points directly to your own mind-heart and attains therefore Buddhahood directly. Buddhahood means the state of being awakened to the real nature of things. But you see, what IS the real nature of things? It obviously cannot be described. Just as if I were to ask what is the true position of the stars in the big dipper. Well, it depends from where you're looking. From one point in space, they would be completely different in position from another. So there is no true position of those stars. So in the same way, you cannot therefore describe their true position or their true nature. And yet on the other hand, when you look at them, and really don't try to figure it out, you see them as they are, and they are as they are from every point of view, wherever you look at them.

So there is no way of describing or putting your finger on what the Buddhists call reality or in Sanscrit, tathata, which means 'suchness' or 'thatness,' or sunyata, which means 'voidness,' in the sense that all conceptions of the world when absolutised are void. It doesn't mean that the world is, in our Western sense, nothing. It means that it's no thing. And a thing--as I think I explained last night--is a unit of thought. A think. So reality isn't a think. We cannot say what it is, but we can experience it. And that is of course the project of Zen.

Now, it does it by direct pointing. And this is what excited people about Dr Suzuki's work when he first let people know about Zen in the Western world. It seemed to consist of an enormous assemblage of weird anecdotes. That these people instead of explaining had kind of a joke system, or kind of a riddle system. The basic secret of the Buddha system is simply this, and it's explained by a great Chinese Zen master, whose name was Hui-neng, who died in the year 713 AD. And he explained it in his sutra. He said, 'If anybody asks you about secular matters, answer them in terms of metaphysical matters. But if they ask you about things physical, answer them in terms of things worldly.' So if you ask a Zen master what is the fundamental teaching of the Buddha, he answers immediately, 'Have you had breakfast?' 'Yes.' 'If so, go and wash your bowl.' Or such a thing as 'Since I came to you master, you have never given me any instruction.' 'How can you say that I've never given you any instruction? When you brought me tea, didn't I drink it? When you brought me rice, didn't I eat it? When you saluted me, didn't I return the salutation? How can you say that I haven't instructed you?' And the student said, 'Master, I don't understand.' And he said, 'If you want to understand, see into it directly, but when you begin to think about it, it is altogether missed.'

They have also in Zen monasteries a funny thing. It's a chin rest. If you spend a long time meditating, it's sometimes convenient to have something to rest your chin on, and it's called a Zen-bon. And so once a student asked the teacher, 'Why did Bodhidharma--' who is supposed to have brought Zen, you know from India to China '--why did Bodhidharma come to China?' And the master said 'Give me that Zen-bon.' And the student passed it to him and the master hit him with it.

A contrary kind of story. The master and one of his students were working, I think pruning trees. And suddenly the student said to the master, 'Will you let me have the knife?' And he handed it to him blade-first. He said 'Please let me have the other end.' And the master said 'What would you do with the other end?'

There was a group walking through the forest, and suddenly the master picked up a branch and handed it to one of his disciples and said 'Tell me, what is it?' Y'know, the master was still holding it. He said 'Tell me, what is it?' The disciple hesitated, and the master hit him with it. He passed it to another desciple. 'What is it?' The disciple said 'Let me have it so I can tell you.' So the master threw the branch at this other disciple, and he caught it and hit the master.

I was once talking with a Zen master, and in an idle sort of way we were discussing these stories, and he said, 'You know, I've often wondered, when water goes down a drain, does it go clockwise or anticlockwise?' 'Well, I said, it might do either.' He said 'NO! It goes this way!' -apparently something visual here,. So then he said 'Which came first, egg or hen?' So I said, -clucks like hen,. He said 'Yes, that's right.'

Now all these Zen jokes are much simpler in their meaning than you would ever imagine. They are so devastatingly simple that you don't see them. Everybody looks for something complicated. When I was once visited by a Chinese Zen man, I had my little daughter with me, and he said to her, 'You know, once upon a time, there was a man who kept a very small goose in a bottle. A gosling. And it began to grow larger and larger until he couldn't get it out of the bottle. Now, he didn't want to break the bottle, and he didn't want to hurt the goose, so what should he do?' And she said immediately, 'Just break the bottle.' He turned to me and he said 'You see, they always get it when they're under seven.'

So there's that side of Zen, and that side of Zen we would call, essentially, in technical language, sanzen. That means, really, to study Zen in the form of an interchange with the teacher. Sanzen in the monasteries these days is very formal. But these are all stories from Tan and Sung dynasty China, where the relationship of student and teacher was more informal than it has now become. The other side of Zen is za-zen, or the practice of meditation. And that involves-- You can actually practice za-zen in four ways, corresponding to what the Buddhists call the four dignitarries of man: walking, standing, sitting, and lying. Only sitting is the one most used. But you should not imagine that Zen mediation requires absolutely that it be done sitting. People get rather hung up on that, and I get annoyed with people who come back from Japan having studied Zen and brag about how long they sat and how much their legs hurt.

But za-zen is very fundamental to Zen, in one form or another. And it is the art of letting your mind become still. That doesn't mean that it becomes blank. That doesn't mean that you have no what we would call sensory input. It mean simply that you learn how to breath properly. That's very important. And that you stop talking to yourself. The interminable chatter inside your skull comes to rest. So what happens is this-- I should add that there are various schools of Zen, with different methods and different approaches, and my approach to it is again somewhat different from other peoples, but buddhas have always have this kind of elasticity. But what normally happens is this:

You have some difficulty in being accepeted by a teacher, because Buddhism is not on a missionary basis. They don't send out ads and invitations saying 'Come to our jolly church,' you know. They wouldn't dream of doing that. Because it's up to you to seek it out. They're never going to shove it down your throat. So it is difficult to get into a Zen school. It isn't really a monastery as we have monasteries, where the monks take life vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. It's more like a theological seminary, and the monk, or seminarist, as he might more accurately be called, stays there for a number of years, until he feels he's got

the thing that he went for. The teacher, the master, is usually unmarried, but that doesn't prevent him from having girlfriends. They are not uptight about sex in Zen, as they are in other forms of Buddhism. They're very-- The whole atmosphere of the monastery is very fascinating. Everybody is sort of alive. They don't dither around. They're all working. But they're very open. In some kinds of Buddhism, they have conniptions if you try to photograph something. 'This is too sacred to be photographed,' sort of attitude. In Zen, they say 'Help yourself! Photograph! Anything! Go on, take picture!' So, completely open.

So then, they have these sesshins. You must distinguish between 'session,' English, and 'sesshin,' Japanese. 'Sesshin' means a long, long period of meditation practice, over say, a whole week. But especially early in the morning, and at certain times of day, they all meet and they sit cross-legged on their mats in meditation. In one set, they meditate on what is called a koan, and that means a 'case,' in the sense of a case in law establishing a precedent. And it's one of these stories. When the great master Joshu•, who lived in the Tung dynasty, was asked, 'Does a dog have buddha nature?' he replied 'mu,' which means no. Everybody knows that dogs have buddha nature. So why did the great master say 'mu'? That's a koan. Or Hakuin invented a koan as a proverb in Chinese: One hand cannot make a clap. So the koan is 'What is the sound of one hand?' Of course, it's differently said in Japanese than it is in English. But, you see, it sounds like a very, very complicated problem, and so these students take this problem back for meditation, and they-- First of all, the average person would start trying to arrive at an intellectual answer. And if he takes that back to the teacher, the teacher simply rejects it out of hand, time after time after time.

I had a friend who had this koan, and he was an American. And one day he was going to the teacher for sanzen, and he saw a bullfrog. They have many bullfrogs in Japan, about so big, sitting in the garden, and they're very tame. So he swooped up this bullfrog and dropped it in the sleeve of his kimono. And when he got to the master, he produced the bullfrog as the answer to the koan. The master shook his head and said 'Uh-uh, too intellectual.' So people get desperate about these things, and they go to all sorts of lengths to try and answer them, because they don't realize how simple the answer is. That's what's always overlooked. If you were to answer that koan in English, it gives it to you as it's stated. It says 'WHAT is the sound of one hand?' .Watts finds this very funny, but nobody else does, It's very difficult for people to become that simple. And you can become that simple only through meditation where you stop all the words and you see all the things perfectly directly. And so accomplished Zen people are very, very direct. Their life is completely simplified, because they know perfectly well--and if you look, and see yourself--that there is only this present moment. No past. No future.

So what's your problem? You know, you could ask this of anyone. Well, you could say 'I've got all sorts of problems and responsibilities' and so on. All right. Don't other people have some share in this? You see, we are always being spiritually conceited in thinking we have to take care of everybody else, and that can sometimes do people a peculiar disservice, because they get into the idea that everybody should take care of them. And so we go around ingratiating ourselves by making all sorts of promises about which we feel enthusiastic at the time, but the enthusiasm wears off and then we don't keep them and then people get annoyed. And we go about telling people how much we like them when we don't. And all sorts of things of that kind by not being direct, you see. This is the whole idea of Zen, is directness. By not being direct, we create a great deal of trouble. However, the primary concern of Zen is not so much with interpersonal relations, as it is with man's relation with nature. In view of life and death, where are you? They have an inscription that hangs up in Zen monasteries, which says 'Birth and death is a serious event. Time waits for no one.' Which is sort of equivalent to the Christian 'Work out your salvation with diligence.' Or with fear and trembling.

So it begins in a clarification of our relationship with existence. With being. And therefore it lies in a more, I would say, primary or kindergarden level than the encounter group, which is concerned with personal relationships. But I don't think you can set up harmonious personal relationships until you've got with

yourself. Until you've got with the sky, the trees, and the rocks, and the water, and the fire. Then you're fundamental. You're really alive. From that position, you can relate much better to other people, because you don't come on as a kind of 'poor little me, who's in this universe on probation and doesn't really belong' attitude. And most of us do that, terribly apologetic for our existence. Just because we're apologetic, some people are insufferably proud, because they feel they have to compensate for this inferior status in the universe by overdoing it with boastfulness and with aggression towards others. But if you know that-- Well, when Dogen came back from China--he lived around 1200 AD, and studied Zen there and founded a great monastery--they asked him 'What did you learn in China?' He said, 'I learned that the eyes are horizontal, and the nose is perpendicular.'

Now in all these things, don't search for a deep symbolism. Some decrepit modern Chinese Zen will look for--will give you a symbolic understanding of all these sayings. But they're NOT symbolic; they're absolutely direct. So when somebody says, you see, that the fundamental principle of Buddhism is a cypress tree in the garden, you are not to understand this this is some pantheistic doctrine in which the cypress tree is a manifestation of the godhead. Let me illustrate the point further, because I can't illustrate it intellectually. It's a little bit of a complicated story, but I think you can follow it.

There is a sect of Buddhism in Japan called Jodo-shinshu .Sukhavati?., which means the true teaching about the pure land. And they have a method of meditation in which they call upon the name of a transcendental buddha called Amida. So they say this formula, 'Namu Amida Butsu.' Namu means like 'hail,' only it means, in other cultures and other languages than ours, instead of saying 'hail,' they say 'name,' 'nama.' So 'Namu Amida Butsu' means 'Hail Amitabha buddha,' or 'Amida' is the Japanese. That formula is called 'Nambutsu,' or 'Having the buddha in mind.'

There was a priest of this sect that went to study with a Zen master, and had made good progress, and the master told him to write a poem expressing his understanding. So he wrote the following poem:

When nambutsu is said, There is neither oneself nor Buddha; Na-mu- a-mi-da-bu-tsu-- Only the sound is heard.

And the Zen master scratched his head awhile, because he wasn't quite satisfied with it, so the student submitted another poem which did satisfy the master, and it went like this:

When the nambutsu is said, There is neither oneself nor Buddha; Na-ma-a-mi-da-bu-tsu, Na-ma-a-mi-da-bu-tsu.

The master was satisfied, but in my opinion it had one line too many.

So you see that the Zen practice involves using words to get beyond words, where we might use words simply for their sound. Let's suppose you say the word 'yes.' Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. You come to think after a while 'Isn't that a funny kind of noise to make?' And we are delivered from the hypnotic effect of words by this particular use of words. We learn they're only words after all, but we hypnotize people by using words. And children, for instance, have no antibodies against words, so they get absolutely frantic, you know. 'Jeannie called me a sissy!' So what? But children get absolutely desperate about it because we put this power of words upon them, these incantations. These are spells, you see. All magicians embroil people in spells and incantations, because they use words to beguile. And so then, we are from infancy told who we are, what is our identity, what our expectations should be, what we ought to get out of life, what class we belong to. And we believe the whole thing. And having believed it, we come to sense it, as we sense the hard wood of the corner of the table, and we think it's real, and it's a bunch of hogwash. It's

an amusing game, if you know that that's all it is, and can be played with eloquence. But the more you know it's ONLY an illusion, the better you can play it.

So then. In this practice, it is very important, as I said last night, to bear it in mind that Zen study or Zen meditation--and this includes yoga and other forms of meditation--is not like any other form of exercise, in that it is NOT done for a purpose. You may ask me 'How can I possibly do something that is not being done for a purpose?' because you have a fixed idea, which is part of the hypnosis, that everything you do is done for a purpose. For what purpose do you have belly rumbles?

I remember Soki Antsuzaki•, who was a great Zen master, sitting in his gorgeous golden robes, with incense burning in front of him, and his scriptures open on the stand, and holding a sort of sceptor that Zen masters occasionally hold, and reading a passage from the sutra, then by comment saying, 'Fundamental principle of Buddhism is purposelessness. Most important to attain state of no purpose. When you drop fart, you don't say 'At 9:00, I drop fart.' It just happen.' And all this kind crypto-Christain audience, very embarrassed, stuffing handkerchiefs into their mouths.

In Chinese, their word for nature is 'tzu-jan,' in Japanese, 'shi-jen•,' at that means, 'what is so of itself. We would say 'spontaneity.' A tree has no intention to grow. Water has no intention to flow. The clouds have no intention to blow. And as the poem says,

When the wild geese fly over the lake,
The water does not intend to reflect them,
And the geese have no mind to cast their image.

Now, that worries us. First of all, we think that spontaneity is mere capricious action. There's nothing very capricious about the way a tree grows. It's a highly intelligent design. So is the bird. So are you. But a lot of people who don't quite understand Zen think that spontaneity is just doing anything, and the more it looks like anything, the more spontaneous it is. In other words, they have a preconception of spontaneity, that a person behaving spontaneously. Or would probably be vulgar, impolite, rude. It doesn't follow; that's merely a preconception of the nature of spontaneity. Spontaneity is the way you grow your hair, it's not the way you think you ought to grow your hair. It's the way it happens. So that's a really high order of intelligence.

What is happening, then, in the discipline of Zen is that we are trying to move into the place where we use that intelligence in everyday life--but you see, you can't get it on purpose. The purpose, the motivation always spoils it. So you would ask then, 'How do I get rid of purpose?' On purpose? That you ask that question simply shows how tied up you are in the thinking process. You cannot force that process to stop. You have to see it as nonsense. Babble. Interminable babble in your head. So one learns to listen to one's thoughts and let the mind think anything it wants to think, but don't take it seriously. And the idea of you doing this is also a babble in the head. And eventually--but without bothering about any eventually, because in this state, there is no future; you're not concerned about the future. Purpose is always concerned with the future.

Now what bugs Western people about this is they would say 'Are you trying to tell us that life has no meaning, no purpose?' Yes. What's so bad about that? What sort of meaning would you like it to have? Propose me a meaning for life. Anything you want. Well, when people try to think of what the meaning of life is, they say 'Well, I think that we're all part of a plan, and that working as if we were characters in a novel or a play, and we are all working towards a great fulfillment. One day, perhaps after we're dead, perhaps in the future life, there'll be a great gazoozie. There'll be a galuptious, glorious goodie at the end of the line, see? And that's what we're all for, see? To get in with that. And it will all be very, very important,

because it won't be something trivial. It will be something extremely holy.' Well I say 'What's your idea of something very holy?' Well, nobody really knows. You know, they think about church, and medieval artists who used to represent heaven in the form of everybody sitting in choir stalls. And I must say hell looked much more fun. It was a kind of sado-masochistic orgy. But heaven looked insufferably dull. And when those little children sang hymns about those eternal sabbaths, it was a a very, depressing future, I can assure you.

But you see, when you follow through these ideas, what do you want? What is the goodie? What is progress all about? You realize that you just don't know. So the question is immediately posed for the meditator, but aren't you there already? I mean, isn't THIS what it's about?

[Alan Watts at deoxy.org](#)