

The Book - Alan Watts

This feeling of being lonely and very temporary visitors in the universe is in flat contradiction to everything known about man (and all other living organisms) in the sciences. We do not "come into" this world; we come of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. Most individuals rarely, if ever, experience this fact. Even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it, but continue to be aware of themselves as isolated "egos" inside bags of skin.

The first result of this illusion is that our attitude to world "outside" us is largely hostile. We are forever "conquering" nature, space, mountains, deserts, bacteria, and insects instead of learning to cooperate with them in a harmonious order.

The second result of felling that we are separate minds an alien, and mostly stupid, universe is that we have no common sense, no way of making sense of the world upon which we are agreed in common. It's just my opinion against yours, and therefore the most aggressive and violent (and thus insensitive) propagandist makes the decisions. A muddle of conflicting opinions united by force of propaganda is the worst possible source of control for a powerful technology. " I am first and foremost a follower of Christ/Mohammed/Buddha, or whomever. "Irrevocable commitment to any religion is not only intellectual suicide; it is positive unfaith because it closes the mind to any new vision of the world. Faith is, above all, open-ness—an act of trust in unknown. We do not need a new religion or a new bible. We need a new experience—a new feeling of what it is to be "I". The lowdown (which is, of course, the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing—with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized. The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego.

"There was never a time when the world began, because it goes round and round like a circle, and there is no place on a circle where it begins. Look at my watch, which tells the time; it goes round, and so the world repeats itself again and again. But just as the hour hand of the watch goes up to twelve and down to six, so, too, there is day and night, waking and sleeping, living and dying, summer and winter. You can't have any one of these without the other, because you wouldn't be able to know what black is unless you had seen it side-by-side with white, or white unless side-by-side with black.

"In the same way, there are times when the world is, and times when it isn't, for if the world went on and on without rest for ever and ever, it would get horribly tired of itself. It comes and it goes. Now you see it; now you don't. So because it doesn't get tired of itself, it always comes back again after it disappears. It's like your breath: it goes in and out, in and out, and if you try to hold it in all the time you feel terrible. It's also like the game of hide-and-seek, because it's always fun to find new ways of hiding, and to seek for someone who doesn't always hide in the same place.

"Of course, you must remember that God isn't shaped I like a person. People have skins and there is always something outside our skins. If there weren't, we wouldn't know the difference between what is inside and outside our bodies. But God has no skin and no shape because there isn't any outside to him. [With a sufficiently intelligent child, I illustrate this with a Mobius strip—a ring of paper tape twisted once in such a way that it has only one side and one edge.] The inside and the outside of God are the same. And though I have been talking about God as 'he' and not 'she', God isn't a man or a woman. I didn't say 'it' because we usually say 'it' for things that aren't alive. God is the Self of the world, but you can't see God for the same reason that, without a mirror, you can't see your own eyes, and you certainly can't bite your own teeth or look inside your head. Your self is that cleverly hidden because it is God hiding.

"You may ask why God sometimes hides in the form of horrible people, or pretends to be people who suffer great disease and pain. Remember, first, that he isn't really doing this to anyone but himself. Remember, too, that in almost all the stories you enjoy there have to be bad people as well as good people, for the thrill of the tale is to find out how the good people will get the better of the bad. It's the same as when we play cards. At the beginning of the game we shuffle them all into a mess, which is like the bad things in the world, but the point of the game is to put the mess into good order, and the one who does it best is the winner. Then we shuffle the cards once more and play again, and so it goes with the world."

"The Ultimate Ground of Being" is Paul Tillich's decontaminated term for "God" and would also do for "the Self of the world" as I put it in my story for children. But the secret which my story slips over to the child is that the Ultimate Ground of Being is you. Not, of course, the everyday you which the Ground is assuming, or "pretending" to be, but that inmost Self which escapes inspection because it's always the inspector. This, then, is the taboo of taboos: you're IT!

Anyone in his right mind who believes that he is God should be crucified or burned at the stake, though now we take the more charitable view that no one in his right mind could believe such nonsense. Only a poor idiot could conceive himself as the omnipotent ruler of the world, and expect everyone else to fall down and worship.

But this is because we think of God as the King of the Universe, the Absolute Technocrat who personally and consciously controls every detail of his cosmos—and that is not the kind of God in my story. In fact, it isn't my story at all, for any student of the history of religions will know that it comes from ancient India, and is the mythical way of explaining the Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta is the teaching of the Upanishads, a

collection of dialogues, stories, and poems, some of which go back to at least 800 B.C. Sophisticated Hindus do not think of God as a special and separate super person who rules the world from above, like a monarch. Their God is "underneath" rather than "above" everything, and he (or it) plays the world from inside. One might say that if religion is the opium of the people, the Hindus have the inside dope. What is more, no Hindu can realize that he is God in disguise without seeing at the same time that this is true of everyone and everything else. In the Vedanta philosophy, nothing exists except God. There seem to be other things than God, but only because he is dreaming them up and making them his disguises to play hide-and-seek with himself. The universe of seemingly separate things is therefore real only for a while, not eternally real, for it comes and goes as the Self hides and seeks itself.

Today the Vedanta discipline comes down to us after centuries of involvement with all the forms, attitudes, and symbols of Hindu culture in its flowering and slow demise over nearly 2,800 years, sorely wounded by Islamic fanaticism and corrupted by British Puritanism. As often set forth, Vedanta rings no bell in the West, and attracts mostly the fastidiously spiritual and diaphanous kind of people for whom incarnation in a physical body is just too disgusting to be borne. But it is possible to state its essentials in a present-day idiom, and when this is done without exotic trappings, Sanskrit terminology, and excessive postures of spirituality, the message is not only clear to people with no special interest in "Oriental religions"; it is also the very jolt that we need to kick ourselves out of our isolated sensation of self. Although sounds of high vibration seem to be continuous, to be pure sound, they are not. Every sound is actually sound/silence, only the ear does not register this consciously when the alternation is too rapid. It appears only in, say, the lowest audible notes of an organ. Light, too, is not pure light, but light/darkness. Light pulsates in waves, with their essential up/down motion, and in some conditions the speed of light vibrations can be synchronized with other moving objects so that the latter appear to be still. This is why arc lights are not used in sawmills, for they emit light at a pulse which easily synchronizes with the speed of a buzz saw in such a way that its teeth seem to be still.

Can we imagine one lonely body, the only ball in the universe, in the midst of empty space? Perhaps. But this ball would have no energy, no motion. In relation to what could it be said to be moving? Things are said to move only when compared with others that are relatively still, for motion is motion/stillness. So let's have two balls, and notice that they come closer to each other, or get further apart. Sure, there is motion now, but which one is moving? Ball one, ball two, or both? There is no way of deciding. All answers are equally right and wrong. Now bring in a third ball. Balls one and two stay the same distance apart, but ball three approaches or retreats from them. Or does it? Balls one and two may be moving together, towards or away from three, or balls one and two may be approaching three as three approaches them, so that all are in motion. How are we to decide? One answer is that because balls one and two stay together, they are a group and also constitute a majority. Their vote will therefore decide who is moving and who is not. But if three joins them it can lick 'em, for if all three stay the same distance apart, the group as a whole cannot move. It will even be impossible for any one to say to the other two, or any two to the other one, "Why do you keep following me (us) around?" For the group as a whole will have no point of reference to know whether it is moving or not. Now in all this discussion, one possibility has been overlooked. Suppose that the balls don't move at all, but that the space between them moves. After all, we speak of a distance (i.e., space) increasing or decreasing as if it were a thing that could do something. This is the problem of the expanding universe. Are the other galaxies moving away from ours, or ours from them, or all from each other? Astronomers are trying to settle the problem by saying that space itself is expanding. But, again, who is to decide? What moves, the galaxies or the space? The fact that no decision can be reached is itself the clue to the answer: not just that both the galaxies and space are expanding [as if they were two different agents], but that something which we must clumsily call galaxies/space, or solid/space, is expanding. It seems that we notice through a double process in which the first factor is a choice of what is interesting or important. The second factor, working simultaneously with the first, is that we need a notation for almost anything that can be noticed. Notation is a system of symbols-words, numbers, signs, simple images (like squares and triangles), musical notes, letters, ideographs (as in Chinese), and scales for dividing and distinguishing variations of color or of tones. Such symbols enable us to classify our bits of perception. They are the labels on the pigeonholes into which memory sorts them, but it is most difficult to notice any bit for which there is no label. Eskimos have five words for different kinds of snow, because they live with it and it is important to them. But the Aztec language has but one word for snow, rain, and hail. What governs what we choose to notice? The first (which we shall have to qualify later) is whatever seems advantageous or disadvantageous for our survival, our social status, and the security of our egos. The second, again working simultaneously with the first, is the pattern and the logic of all the notation symbols which we have learned from others, from our society and our culture. It is hard indeed to notice anything for which languages available to us (whether verbal, mathematical, or musical) have no description. This is why borrow words from foreign languages. There is no English word for a type of feeling which the Japanese call *yugen*, and we can only understand by opening our minds to situations in which Japanese people use the word.

The first is not realizing that so-called opposites, such as light and darkness, sound and silence, solid and space, on and off, inside and outside, appearing and disappearing, cause and effect, are poles or aspects of the same thing. But we have no word for that thing, save such vague concepts as Existence, Being, God, or the Ultimate Ground of Being. For the most part these remain nebulous ideas without becoming vivid feelings or experiences.

The second, closely related, is that we are so absorbed in conscious attention, so convinced that this narrowed kind of perception is not only the real way of seeing the world, but also the very basic sensation of oneself as a conscious being, that we are fully hypnotized by its disjointed vision of the universe. We really feel that this world is indeed an assemblage of separate things that have somehow come together or, perhaps, fallen apart, and that we are each only one of them. We see them all alone—born alone, dying alone—maybe as bits and fragments of a universal whole, or expendable parts of a big machine. Rarely do we see all so-called things and events "going together," like the head and tail of the cat, or as the tones and inflections—rising and falling, coming and going—of a single singing voice.

In other words, we do not play the Game of Black and-White—the universal game of up/down, on/off, solid/space, and each/all. Instead, we play the game of Black-versus-White or, more usually, White-versus-Black For, especially when rates of vibration are slow as with day and night or life and death, we are forced to be aware of the black or negative aspect of the world. Then, not realizing the inseparability of the positive and negative poles of the rhythm, we are afraid that Black may win the game. But the game "White must win" is no longer a game. It is a fight—a fight haunted by a sense of chronic frustration, because we are doing something as crazy as trying to keep the mountains and rid of the valleys.

The principal form of this fight is Life-versus-Death, the so-called battle for survival, which is supposed to be the real, serious task of all living creatures. This illusion is maintained (a) because the fight is temporarily successful (we go on living until we don't), and (b) cause living requires effort and ingenuity, though this is also true of games as distinct from fights. So far as we know, animals do not live in constant anxiety about sickness and death, as we do, because they live in the present. Nevertheless, they will fight when in hunger or when attacked. We must, however, be careful of taking animals as models of "perfectly natural" behavior. If "natural" means "good" or "wise," human beings can improve on animals, though they do not always do so. But human beings, especially in Western civilization make death the great bogey. This has something to with the popular Christian belief that death will be followed by the dread Last Judgment, when sinners will be consigned to the temporary horrors of Purgatory or everlasting agony of Hell. More usual, today, is the fear that death will take us into everlasting nothingness—as if that could be some sort of experience, like being buried alive forever. No more friends, no more sunlight and birdsong, no more love or laughter, no more ocean and stars—only darkness without end.

Imagination cannot grasp simple nothingness and must therefore fill the void with fantasies, as in experiments with sensory deprivation where subjects are suspended weightlessly in sound- and light-proof rooms. When death is considered the final victory of Black over White in the deadly serious battle of "White must win" the fantasies, which fill the void are largely ghoulish. Even our popular fantasies of Heaven are on the grim side, because the usual image of God is of a very serious and awesome Grandfather, enthroned in a colossal church—and, of course, in church one may decorously "rejoice" but not have real, rip-roaring fun.

Death is, after all, a great event. So long as it is not imminent, we cling to ourselves and out lives in chronic anxiety, however pushed into the back of the mind. But when the time comes where clinging is no longer of the least avail, the circumstances are ideal for letting go of oneself completely. When this happens, the individual is released from his ego-prison. In the normal course of events this is the golden opportunity for awakening into the knowledge that one's actual self is the Self which plays the universe—an occasion for great rejoicing. But as customs now prevail, doctors, nurses, and relatives come around with smiling masks, assuring the patient that he will soon get over it, and that next week or next month he will be back home or taking a vacation by the sea. Worse still, physicians have neither the role nor the training for handling death. The Catholic priest is in a much better position: he usually knows just how to go about it, with no fumbling or humming and hawing. But the physician is supposed to put off death at all costs—including the life savings of the patient and his family. The science-fiction in which we have just been indulging has, then, two important morals. The first is that if the game of order-versus-chance is to continue as game, order must not win. As prediction and control increase, so, in proportion, the game ceases to be worth the candle. We look for a new game with an uncertain result. In other words, we have to hide again, perhaps in a new way, and then seek in new ways, since the two together make up the dance and the wonder of existence. Contrariwise, chance must not win, and probably cannot, because the order/chance polarity appears to be of the same kind as the on/off and up/down. Some astronomers believe that our universe began with an explosion that hurled all the galaxies into space, where, through negative entropy, it will dissolve forever in featureless radiation. I cannot think this way. It is, I suppose, my basic metaphysical axiom, my "leap of faith," that what happened once can always happen again. Not so much that there must be time before the first explosion and time after the final dissolution, but that time (like space) curves back on itself. This assumption is strengthened by the second moral of these fantasies, which is the more startling. Here applies the French proverb *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*—the more it changes, the more it's the same thing. Change is in some sense an illusion, for we are always at the point where any future can take us! If the human race develops an electronic nervous system, outside the bodies of individual people, thus giving us all one mind and one global body, this is almost precisely what has happened in the organization of cells which compose our own bodies. We have already done it. Thus for thousands of years human history has been a magnificently futile conflict, a wonderfully staged panorama of triumphs and tragedies based on the resolute taboo against admitting that black goes with white. Nothing, perhaps, ever got nowhere with so much fascinating ado. As when Tweedledum and Tweedledee agreed to have a battle, the essential trick of the Game of Black-and-White is a most tacit conspiracy for the partners to conceal their unity, and to look as

different as possible. It is like a stage fight so well acted that the audience is ready to believe it a real fight. Hidden behind their explicit differences is the implicit unity of what Vedanta calls the Self, the One-without-a-second, the what there is and the all that there is which conceals itself in the form of you.

Naturally, it isn't the mere fact of being named brings about the hoax of being a "real person"; it ' that goes with it. The child is tricked into the ego-f by the attitudes, words, and actions of the society w surrounds him—his parents, relatives, teachers, above all, his similarly hoodwinked peers. Other teach us who we are. Their attitudes to us are the in which we learn to see ourselves, but the mirror is distorted. We are, perhaps, rather dimly aware of the immense power of our social environment. We seldom realize, for example, that our most private thoughts emotions are not actually our own. For we terms of languages and images which we did not inv but which were given to us by our society. We emotional reactions from our parents, learning them that excrement is supposed to have a disgusting smell and that vomiting is supposed to be an unpleasant sensation. The dread of death is also learned from anxieties about sickness and from their attitudes to funerals and corpses. Our social environment has power just because we do not exist apart from a Society is our extended mind and body. To sum up: just as no thing or organism exists on its own, it does not act on its own. Furthermore, every organism is a process: thus the organism is not other than its actions. To put it clumsily: it is what it does More precisely, the organism, including its behavior, is a process which is to be understood only in relation to the larger and longer process of its environment. For what we mean by "understanding" or "comprehension" is seeing how parts fit into a whole, and then realizing that they don't compose the whole, as one assembles a jigsaw puzzle, but that the whole is a pattern, a complex wiggliest, which has no separate parts. Parts are fictions of language, of the calculus of looking at the world through a net, which seems to chop it up into bits. Parts exist only for purposes of figuring and describing, and as we figure the world out we become confused if we do not remember this all the time. Once this is clear, we have shattered the myth of Fully Automatic Universe where human consciousness and intelligence are a fluke in the midst of boundless stupidity. For if the behavior of an organism is intelligible only in relation to its environment, intelligent behavior implies an intelligent environment. Obviously, if "parts" do not really exist, it makes no sense to speak of an intelligent part of an unintelligent whole. It is easy enough to see that an intelligent human being implies an intelligent human society, for thinking is a social activity—a mutual interchange of messages and ideas based on such social institutions as languages, sciences, libraries, universities, and museums. But what about the non-human environment in which human society flourishes?

Ecologists often speak of the "evolution of environments" over and above the evolution of organisms. For man did not appear on earth until the earth itself, together with all its biological forms, had evolved to a certain degree of balance and complexity. At this point of evolution the earth "implied" man, just as the existence of man implies that sort of a planet at that stage of evolution. The balance of nature, the "harmony of contained conflicts," in which man thrives is a network of mutually interdependent organisms of the most astounding subtlety and complexity. Teilhard de Chardin has called it the "biosphere," the film of living organisms which covers the original "geosphere," the mineral planet. Lack of knowledge about the evolution of the organic from the "inorganic," coupled with misleading myths about life coming "into" this world from somewhere "outside," has made it difficult for us to see that the biosphere arises, or goeswith, a certain degree of geological and astronomical evolution. But, as Douglas E. Harding has pointed out, we tend to think of this planet as a life-infested rock, which is as absurd as thinking of the human body as a cell-infested skeleton. Surely all forms of life, including man, must be understood as "symptoms" of the earth, the solar system, and the galaxy—in which case we cannot escape the conclusion that the galaxy is intelligent.

Just as true humor is laughter at oneself, true humanity is knowledge of oneself. Other creatures map love and laugh, talk and think, but it seems to be the special peculiarity of human beings that they reflect: they think about thinking and know that they know. This, like other feedback systems, may lead to vicious, circles and confusions if improperly managed, but self-awareness makes human experience resonant. It imparts that simultaneous "echo" to all that we think and feel as the box of a violin reverberates with the sound of the strings. It gives depth and volume to what would otherwise be shallow and fiat. Self-knowledge leads to wonder, and wonder to curiosity and investigation, so that nothing interests people more than people, even if only one's own person. Every intelligent individual wants to know what makes him tick, and yet is at once fascinated and frustrated by the fact that oneself is the most difficult of all things to know. For the human organism is, apparently, the most complex of all organisms, and while one has the advantage of knowing one's own organism so intimately—from the inside—there is also the disadvantage of being so close is why the root of consciousness has been called, paradoxically, the unconscious.