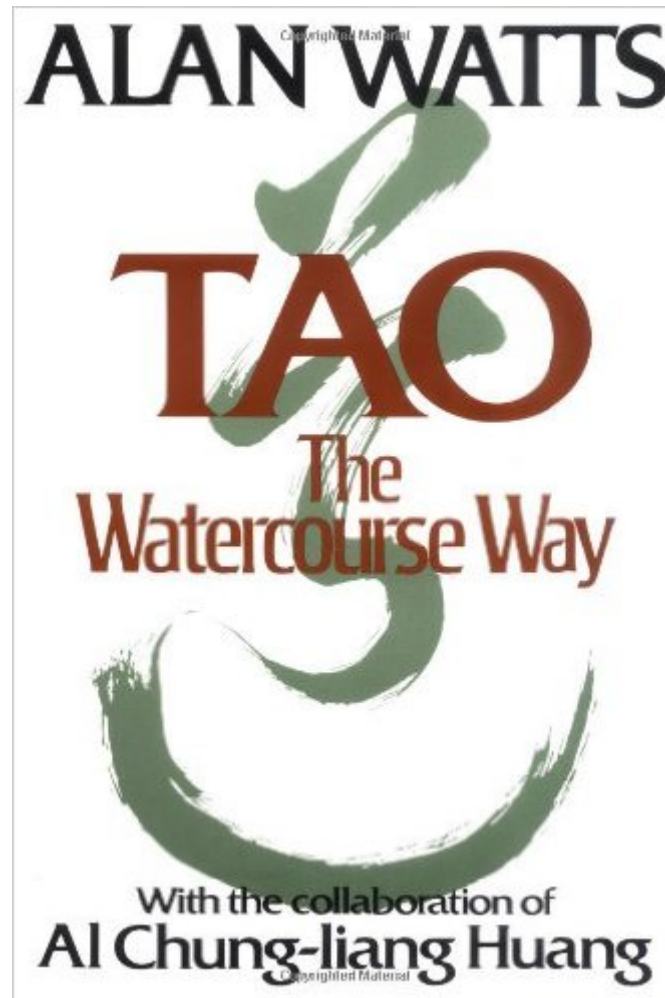


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Tao: The Watercourse Way



Synopsis

Drawing on ancient and modern sources, Watts treats the Chinese philosophy of Tao in much the same way as he did Zen Buddhism in his classic *The Way of Zen*. Critics agree that this last work stands as a perfect monument to the life and literature of Alan Watts.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Tao: The Watercourse Way" is the last book written by Alan Watts. It was one of his best. Though it is specifically about Contemplative Taoism it contains a distillation of wisdom garnered from a lifetime of learning about the nature of reality from many different traditions. Wisdom has no boundaries. This book deserves a place in the smallest of personal libraries. The Tao is the fundamental first-cause behind all of the ways of the Chinese masters of old. The Way of ways, the pathless path, the watercourse way. The Tao is like a river, a river of nonduality. A great river banked by duality, yin and yang. Watts states that Taoism is neither a religion nor a philosophy though it has aspects of both. Taoism is about living a balanced life. Even Confucianism has an element of Taoism about it so fundamental is the way of the Tao to the Chinese. Taoism is a way of life that may appeal to you if you are tired of vacillating between such vexing polarities as absolute doubt and absolute certainty. The Watercourse Way is a way of moderation in all things. A way of life that goes with the flow of natural and supernatural forces. The Way of Wisdom. Watts was my kind of Taoist. In the chapter on "Te-Virtuality" Watts offers us an overview of the contemplative way of life. A life of freedom from constraints and extremes. Watts had come a long way from the stuffy England of his youth. He had found an unforced way of living life that agreed with him. An artful way

of being true to himself by living naturally; of being free to scream, or cry, or most especially to laugh, whatever is appropriate to the flow of the moment. In the "Wu-wei" chapter Watts reminds us of the words of Lao-Tzu concerning wu-wei: "The Tao does nothing, and yet nothing is left undone". Wu-wei, the principle of "nonaction" is not inactivity. Wu-wei is the right action of letting nature take its course. A minimalist way of finesse rather than force. A way to roll with the punch, to swim with the tide, to go with the flow. Thus wu-wei is not so much the absence of effort as it is right effort, effort used wisely, such as in the art of Judo. Wu-wei is poetry in motion. Balance is not static. The chapter on the "Yin-Yang Polarity" describes the fundamental principle of Taoism. The eternal Tao is an underlying unity which manifests itself as a duality of seeming opposites that ebb and flow in and out of each other in an ordered manner. The Tao creates yin and yang; male and female, day and night, positive and negative, subject and object, self and other. Within each opposite is the seed of its seeming opposite, or opposite non-opposite. No yin or yang is pure. Only Tao is pure. Only source never changes. To make an ideal of any extreme is to disrupt the natural give and take of the interplay between yin and yang, the dance of life. Day dissolves into night dissolves into day... Nature is whole. A rope has two ends but is a whole rope. We can only know the things of duality in contrast to their opposite. We have a tendency to put too much emphasis on the apparent polarities around us and not enough on the underlying unity. Lao-Tzu: "The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao". Nonduality, not two, not yin and yang, is an ineffable whole without a second. We can never know nonduality, but we can experience it. Thus dogma is secondary to experience where the Tao is concerned. I AM THAT I AM. Duality is a different matter. We can know yin from yang. Good from bad for one without the other is meaningless. Day without night is a shadow. Life without death is dead. Such is the nature of duality and nonduality, of yin and yang and the Tao. Such is the nature of Nature. Watts chapter on the "Chinese Written Language" is one of the most eye opening essays about the Oriental mind I have ever read. The Chinese language is written in ideograms, pictures. Think of a DO NOT ENTER pictogram, a circle with a diagonal slash, a type of ideogram. It tells you what to do or not do, but not why. The why is part of a larger context, a bigger picture. Such is the nature of the Chinese language. Simple yet complex. Pictures within pictures. Combine this with trying to write about the unwriteable nature of nonduality, the Tao, and the pedantics of Kant can seem rather simple at times. The Tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao. I AM INDESCRIBABLE. In Watt's "Prolegomena" to "Tao: The Watercourse Way" he discusses the inherent problems of pure communication where Eastern wisdom is concerned. Watts, ever the gentleman, points out his strengths and his weaknesses for such an effort. Watts forthrightness and integrity is apparent. He readily admits that his first priority in his translation of Chinese to English,

he includes the translations of others with credits, is to the 'spirit' as opposed to the 'letter' of what the old masters had to say. A bias I can live with. Watts is great at painting pictures with words in a most entertaining and enlightening way. He speaks to us from his heart. I am truly sorry that this was his last book. He passed away before he could complete it. His good friend Tai Chi Master Chungliang Al Huang did a yeoman's job of finishing and then bringing Watt's "Tao: The Watercourse Way" to print. Wisdom leaps off every page. At times it takes quantum leaps. A picture can indeed be worth a thousand words.

Many years ago I undertook an extensive program of reading in Zen Buddhism, which as many know is simply Buddhism as filtered through the Taoist sensibility. I must have read or consulted upwards of a hundred books before finally getting around to Alan Watts 'Way of Zen.' Bummer! What I found was that pretty well everything I'd learned was right there in Watts, plus a few inimitable bits of his own. Did someone say he was a genius...? To read the present book it isn't, of course, necessary to have read 'The Way of Zen' first, although you'll probably want to read it afterwards. Nor is it necessary to have read Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu, although those who haven't will probably want to go on to them too. They'll want to go on to get the rest of the story, because the present book was unfortunately unfinished at the time of Watts' death. Despite its unfinished state, however, it's a gem we wouldn't want to be without, and there's plenty in it for both the newbie as well as others. Watts was an amazingly good writer. His style is clear and straightforward, and he had the knack of making even the knottiest matters understandable. One of the more noteworthy things about the book is Watts' inclusion of a chapter on 'The Chinese Written Language.' In my more cynical moods I'm sometimes inclined to think that there is a conspiracy in the West to pretend that Chinese doesn't exist. Here we have one of the most fascinating and important languages in the world, and yet so few seem to be interested in it. So profound is this neglect that most English books on Chinese subjects don't even bother to give the Chinese characters for names and book titles, presumably because they don't realize how useless the romanized forms are. Watts' book is a happy exception to this dangerous neglect. The Chinese texts of all quoted passages is given in Al Chung-Liang Huang's fine calligraphy. The Chinese characters of all key terms are also given in the margins of the book. Even the titles of some of the books in the Bibliography have been given both in romanized form and in Chinese characters. And to top it off, there is Watts' fine chapter in which something of the logic and beauty of the Chinese writing system is explained in an interesting and informative way. Watts was evidently a man who wanted to share the important and beautiful things he had found in life. I think his chapter on Chinese writing was

intended to draw us in. I'm sure he was hoping that we would begin to see the very real link that exists between Chinese calligraphy and the Tao, and that what all good calligraphy shows us is the Tao in action. I think he might also have been hoping that a few readers might even go on to take up Chinese, so that they could see for themselves how "Chinese has the peculiar advantage of being able to say many things at once and to mean all of them" (page 10). This is why, as Burton Watson has pointed out, all translations from Chinese must be personal. There can be no such thing as a definitive translation because there is no such thing as a definitive interpretation. In other words, when it comes to translations from the Chinese by competent translators, instead of saying "This is right and that is wrong," it's much more sensible to say "This is right and that isn't wrong either." Frankly I don't think Watts would have minded what you said. But what a pity he didn't finish his book and show us, as he intended to, another form of the Tao in action.

I have just purchased this book as a replacement for one I lent to someone several years ago and never got back. It is not an introductory book on Taoism; there are plenty of those on the market, by Alan Watts and others. This book is, I believe, for those who already know something about Taoism and the Tao. Like the Tao Te Ching itself and many other oriental books it cannot be understood as a factual account but requires a degree of intuitive understanding. If you want an introduction to Taoism, don't buy this book. If you already know the Tao, and want to take your understanding further, this book succeeds admirably. Tony S

This is Alan Watts' final work, left incomplete upon his death, "finished" by Al Chung-liang Huang. Many sections of the work seem sketchy and undeveloped, which is unsurprising. That said, that which is there is as well-written as any of Watts' other prose. As an "introduction" to Taoism, it is somewhat lacking, but it's a good work to pick up after you're already familiar with the Tao Te Ching in common translations. The chapter on the method and beauty of the Chinese written language is a notable highlight. In short, if you're looking for an introduction to Taoism, start with the Tao Te Ching; if you're looking for an introduction to Alan Watts, start with "The Way of Zen". But the fact that this book doesn't fulfill either of those purposes well doesn't detract from its good points.

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