

SUMMARY

THE WAY OF ZEN

ALAN W. WATTS



Summary of “The Way of Zen” by Alan W. Watts

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn about the history and practice of Zen.

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Introduction

Have you ever seen the animated movie “Kung Fu Panda?” If you have, you might remember the scene where Shifu, the wise red panda teacher, is standing on a mountain and trying to meditate. Every time, he strikes a peaceful yoga pose and murmurs the words, “Inner peace...” And every time, a single droplet of water falls from the tip of the cliff overhead and boops him on the nose. This, of course, makes Shifu immensely frustrated until he ruins the peaceful exercise by hopping up and down screaming, “Inner peace!” This scene makes for a humorous portion of the movie, but I wonder how much it also influences our perception of the concept of “Zen.”

For example, we understand that meditation is a relaxation practice that originated in Asian cultures. Many of us assume that “Zen” is connected to meditation because it sounds like they go together. But how much do we really know about the concept of Zen and its history? How much do we understand about the impact of Zen on our lives? Author Alan W. Watts recognizes that many Westerners may be mystified by the core tenets of Zen, so he writes to break down those barriers and unpack the concepts which confuse us. So, over the course of this summary, we’ll take a look at his in-depth analysis of Zen in culture and practice.

The Origins of Zen

The concept of Zen can trace its ancestral roots to certain tenets of the Buddhist religion. For example, the Buddhist concept of “enlightenment” or “awakening” is a core tenet of Zen. But that’s pretty much where their relationship ends. Although it might surprise you, the truth is that Zen and Buddhism are not the same thing. In fact, Zen actually originated in China in the year 400 AD. The development of Zen doctrine occurred in response to the revolutionary ideology of a group of Chinese monks. One monk in particular, a young man named Seng-chao, believed that moments do not flow into one another in the natural progression to which we are accustomed. For example, we might describe the passage of time as being characterized by certain seasons. We might say that it is morning now because yesterday ended and the night passed, creating a new moment in time or a new day. But Seng-chao would disagree.

Rather than embracing the perception that time and space are interconnected, Seng-chao argued that each moment exists as a separate entity, fully removed from anything that comes before or after. He posited that living in this manner was the only way to stay truly present in any given moment. He also believed that living in the moment thusly eliminated worry and stress. This makes sense because, if we really think about it, very few worries are situated in something that besets us in an individual moment. Instead, we spend an overwhelming portion of our lives fretting about both the past and the future. Seng-chao sought to remedy this problem by creating a school of thought that would encourage people to live in the present moment. Zen grew out of this philosophy and therefore developed one of its core tenets: there is no moment but the present.

Zen Frees You From the Entanglement of the Self

How would you describe yourself? Would you say you want to be happy? These are two of the biggest questions that beset all human beings. In fact, many of us spend the majority of our lives pursuing both happiness and the meaning of life, often to no avail. We struggle with statements like, “Be yourself” because many people are uncertain about who they really are. Similarly, we chase happiness in all the wrong ways because, as much as we want to be happy, we often have no clue about what happiness really looks like. Zen understands these common concerns and seeks to provide the solution.

This is what makes Zen different from a religion like Buddhism or a practice like meditation; rather than functioning as a ritual or a belief system, Zen is more of a state of mind.

And it starts by disentangling you from yourself. At first, that might sound both bizarre and painful. That’s because Western philosophy teaches us that the concept of “yourself” is an intrinsic thing, as natural to you as your skin or eye color. So, if you become disentangled from yourself, doesn’t that mean that you cease to have an identity? Or that you seek to exist? Without yourself, what makes you “you?” Zen counteracts this school of thought by positing that the “self” is not a static thing. In fact, Zen argues that the concept of “self” as we know it doesn’t really exist at all. Because Zen operates on the belief that there is no moment but the present, it affirms that you are constantly changing and evolving. So, because the “you” of two hours ago did not have the experience or insight that you have right now, Zen argues that you can’t necessarily still be the same person. And as a result, you cannot lay claim to a singular, static “self.”

Although that concept might sound bizarre, proponents of Zen argue that it’s actually very freeing. For example, when we operate on the premise of Western ideology, we accept common Westernized beliefs like the fact that we are the sum total of our thoughts, accomplishments, and experiences. This can generate intense feelings of depression, guilt, or shame because

we may dislike our thoughts, accomplishments, and experiences. And if we believe these things to be the measure of ourselves and our identities, it's understandable that we will develop a negative self-image. But if, instead, you accept that you do not possess a concept of "self" and that there is no moment but the present, your life will feel supercharged with possibility! Unencumbered by the guilt or pressures of a static, continuous "self," you can charge boldly into each new moment and make the most of it. The concept of Zen, therefore, offers freedom and relief!

Zen Frees us From the Concept of Happiness

As we established in the previous chapter, the concept of happiness is much like our concept of the self in that it often brings us great distress. That's because Western culture is heavily characterized by toxic positivity and the perception that happiness should be experienced as a continuous state of mind. As a result, we often feel a great deal of pressure to be happy and torment ourselves with questions such as, "Why am I not happy? Why do I feel this way? What do I need to do to be happy?" Zen, in contrast to Western philosophy, rejects the concept of happiness entirely.

That's because Zen recognizes that it's foolish to assume that happiness can be a perpetual state of mind. Zen acknowledges that life is made up of equal parts of good and bad and therefore, it's impossible for your experience of life to exist solely on the "good" spectrum. So, by deconstructing the idea that we should be happy all the time, Zen helps us to accept that it's okay to be sad and it's okay to experience moments of unhappiness. Zen also empowers us to reject the concept that we should strive for a certain level of happiness.

This is partly because authenticity is another core tenet of Zen. Although many aspects of Western society hinge on a "fake it till you make it" mentality, Zen stands in direct opposition to anything that is inauthentic. Zen ideology recognizes that no one benefits from trying to pretend that they are something they aren't and no one benefits from competing with others. Rather, Zen posits that we should strive to emulate nature and grow in the way that is most authentic to us. A flower, for example, does not try to be better than the flower growing beside it. A daisy does not try to convince others that it's actually a rose. Instead, every being in nature follows the natural progression of its own growth. And that's exactly what we should strive to do.

As a result, Zen philosophy puts forth a new emotional model for its practitioners to follow. Where Western ideology might value things like

“holding it together” or “never letting the haters see you cry,” Zen posits that every natural emotion you express is important because it is authentic to you. So, if you feel like crying, that’s okay! If your response to grief doesn’t align with the traditional model of acceptable grief behaviors (for example, laughing instead of crying or trying to distract yourself instead of wallowing in your pain), that’s okay too. Every expression of your identity and your emotions is valuable.

However, that does not mean that literally every expression is acceptable; for example, violence, murder, and rape are not considered to be valid according to the tenets of Zen. You might be angry enough to commit an act of violence, but that doesn’t mean you have the right to do so. Put simply, Zen invites us to express ourselves authentically within the boundaries of morality and ethics. This, like the freedom to let go of the concepts of happiness and self, is intended to bring us closer to enlightenment and peace.

Meditation and Zen

As you can see from the previous chapters, many facets of our understanding of Zen-- like assuming that it is the same as Buddhism or that Zen employs facets of Western ideology-- are incorrect. And as you've probably already guessed, the same is true of meditation. Today, meditation has gone mainstream. It is widely accepted as a good practice for cultivating peace, mental clarity, and spiritual enlightenment. In fact, many apps tout the importance of meditation (or its trendier alternative name, mindfulness) and many corporations organize mindfulness retreats for their employees. So, because meditation is so prevalent in Western culture, it's easy to assume that we already know a good deal about it. But that might not necessarily be the case. While it is true that meditation is all about inner peace, it might not be the same concept of inner peace that you've envisioned.

This is especially true when it comes to the matter of "meditation goals." You may have been asked this question by a friend, an app, or a yoga instructor: what are your goals for your meditation session? At first glance, this sounds productive because it invites you to envision a positive outcome and work towards it. And perhaps you're working towards something pure and necessary, like peace, tranquility, or mental clarity. But the presence of any meditation "goals" are actually in direct opposition to Zen.

That's because Zen meditation is all about the absence of goals! Rather than concentrating your energy on the development of a clear mind or a calm spirit, Zen invites you to accept yourself and your world exactly as it is. Unless you experience your true reality and find peace within it, the Zen school of thought believes that you will never experience true peace. So, when you practice sitting meditation (or za-Zen, in Japanese), don't concentrate on what you want to get out of the session or on cultivating a clear mind. Instead, concentrate solely on experiencing your world as it is and letting your thoughts flow without judgment. As you let your thoughts

pass authentically, you will achieve the clarity you seek the Zen way:
naturally and in your own time.

Final Summary

Zen may find its roots in Buddhism (leading to the popular misconception that Zen and Buddhism are one and the same), but their relationship ends there. Although some Buddhist principles may have planted the early seeds of Zen, those seeds were grown and harvested by some radical Chinese monks who wanted to create a simpler school of thought. In contrast to Buddhism, Zen is less a religion and more of a state of mind. It also differs drastically from all Western ideology. That's because Zen is founded on the principles of freedom, authenticity, and peace. Zen rejects Western concepts such as the self and happiness and instead invites us to live in the moment and practice authentic self-expression.



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