

★ **The Collected Letters of Alan Watts**

Alan Watts

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The Collected Letters adds a new portal to the identity of the man most responsible for introducing Zen Buddhism to the West.

Edited by his daughters, Joan and Anne Watts, these assembled letters of Alan Watts—the British-born writer, lecturer, and popular philosopher—are perhaps the most complete and accurate profile of the man and his work.

Coming always in Watts's congenial, energetic voice, which displays his facility for metaphor and his ability to simplify metaphysical ideas, these letters range from his teen years, when his interest in Eastern philosophy was kindled, through his life as an Episcopal priest, university professor, and radio personality. The last letters in the collection were written just months before Watts's death at the age of fifty-eight.

Addressed to his parents and friends, as well as to notable scholars and spiritual leaders such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Campbell, the letters are by turns chatty, personal, and intellectual. Many cover the topics and purposes of his published works. They expose his efforts to show how Eastern philosophy, along with long-neglected insights from Christian mystics, can inform and enliven the "too intellectual" and stolid churches and churchmen of the West, restoring a sense of worship, mystery, and beauty.

These letters illuminate, for example, Watts's surprising decision to become an Episcopal priest, and his discovery some years later that the church might not be "the best of all ways to God," leading to his resignation. Watts's later letters touch on his experiences with LSD and other hallucinogens, and his conviction that they should not be categorized with dangerous drugs.

Watts's daughters provide introductions to the chronologically organized sections of letters, and they periodically comment on individual entries. They do not delve deeply into their father's ideas, but their summaries are succinct and helpful. More importantly, they add indispensable context and insights into Watts's personal and family life. While treating his memory with love and respect, they acknowledge his free and open sex life and the resulting instability in the lives of his seven children.

The Collected Letters adds a new portal to the identity of the man most responsible for introducing Zen Buddhism and the many strands of Eastern philosophy to the masses in the West.

JOE TAYLOR (November/December 2017)

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