

The Book Summary

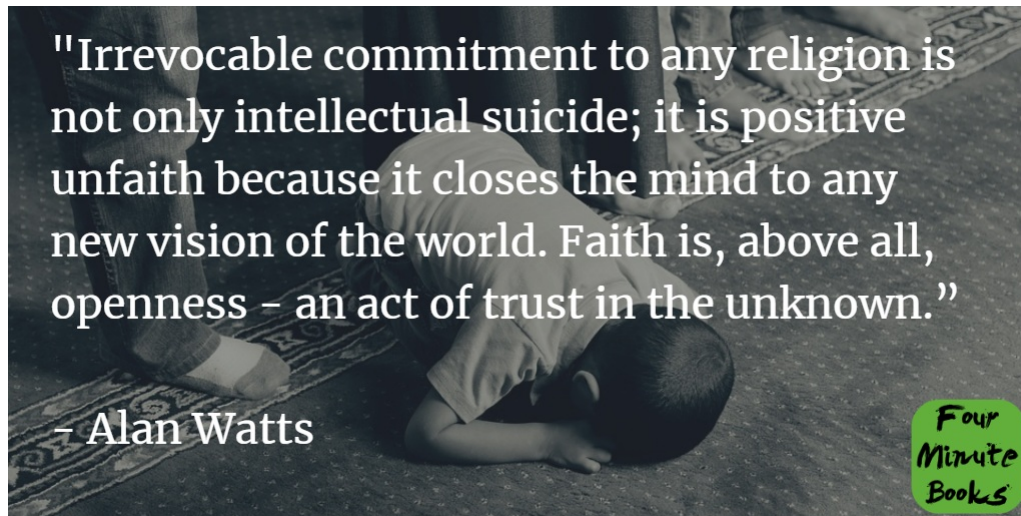


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1-Sentence-Summary: *[The Book](#) is a spiritual exploration that challenges wide-spread, but often unconscious notions about the true human nature and our place in the universe.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



The subtitle of [The Book](#) is “*On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.*” It verbalizes Alan Watts’ starting point to his meditations on the nature of humanity, our place in the universe and the spiritual aspect of human life.

Virtually every culture has its own taboos. In [Japan](#), for instance, it was for centuries customary not to mention sex in conversations. On the day of marriage, newlywed couples received so-called “pillow books,” which explained sexual matters. This gave the opportunity for people to avoid a conversation about the embarrassing topic.

Back in 1966 when *The Book* was first published, Watts already noticed that there were fewer and fewer taboos left in Western culture. But one that remained – and probably remains until today – is the discussion around the true identity of human beings.

Watts wrote *The Book* to unpack this taboo and to share a perspective profoundly different from the one we usually adopt through traditional upbringing and education. His core message points to *unity and connectivity* as inherent qualities of all life.

Here are 3 points from *The Book* that really got me thinking:

1. None of us is separated from the rest of life.
2. The law of cause and effect is an illusion.
3. Death can be seen as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

Ready to have your understanding of the world challenged? Then let’s check what *The Book* has to

offer!

Lesson 1: You are part of a bigger whole, rather than a lonely island.

The first fallacy Watts point us to is that most people perceive themselves as entities separated from the rest of the world. In his own words:

“Most of us have the sensation that ‘I myself’ is a separate center of feeling and action, living inside and bounded by the physical body – a center which “confronts” an “external” world of people and things, making contact through the senses with a universe both alien and strange.”

This way of looking at ourselves has far-reaching consequences. It often leads us to put artificial barriers between ourselves and others and fight with reality to “get what we want.” The perceived opposition between the “I” and everything else is very apparent in our language. Just consider customary phrases like “you must face reality” or “the conquest of nature.”

Watts wants you to see through this illusion of “me against the world.” He explains how we are all intrinsic parts of the whole universe. **The unity and interconnectedness with our environment is our true [nature and identity](#) – so it should have priority over the illusion of separation that our physical bodies reinforce.**

The Book reminds us that the Earth grows people, just like it grows forests or creates waves. That simple realization is the reason we should consider ourselves as *interdependent* with the world – rather than *independent* from it.

Lesson 2: Causality of events is a kind of cognitive bias.

Most of us [perceive the world](#) in binary terms. We recognize *day* based on its opposition to *night* – and the other way around. This kind of labeling leads us to believe that things are indeed black or white in this world.

Such a [biased perception](#) is often taken for granted and not even verbalized. That’s just how everyone sees the world – and so it doesn’t cross our minds to question it. Germans refer to such deeply embedded assumptions as *Hintergedanken*, which literally translates as “behind the thoughts.”

One of the widespread *Hintergedanken* is that life works according to the law of cause and effect. Watts claims that this law is nothing but an illusion. However, once embraced, it distorts our image of reality in a way that continuously reinforces what we want to see.

To illustrate this, let’s compare the “cause and effect” bias to a little hole in a fence, through which you observe the world. Let’s also imagine you have never seen a cat before in your life.

As you look through the hole, a cat passes by. You see its head first. Then, there comes the body, followed by the tail. If you observe long enough, the cat will pass by several times and you will conclude that the view of the body is obviously an *effect* of the head. Simultaneously, it gives the *cause* for the tail to emerge a moment later.

As long as you look through the hole, it will never occur to you that the head, the body, and the tail are

actually parts of one and the same *cat*. You will continue to see them as separate events, one “resulting” from the other.

Lesson 3: Death is an opportunity, not a threat.

The concept of death as the doomsday of our lives is deeply rooted in Western culture. According to Watts, Christianity is largely responsible for that.

In Christian doctrine, the Final Judgment follows death. It separates those who deserve to live in the eternal Heaven from the ones condemned to damnation in Hell. There is no strong alternative to this doctrine in Western culture, other than the atheist vision of disappearing into nothingness after death.

None of that sounds particularly comforting, does it? However, Watts points out that there are numerous traditions which treat death not as a something to be afraid of. Instead, death is an opportunity.

Death can be seen as a gateway to a new dimension of [spiritual growth](#). In fact, reminding yourself about the inevitability of death can greatly add to the sense of [purpose](#) and quality of your life. As Greek spiritual teacher, G. I. Gurdjieff said:

“Every one of those unfortunates during the process of existence should constantly sense and be cognizant of the inevitability of his own death (...). Only such a sensation and such a cognizance can now destroy the egoism completely crystallized in them that has swallowed up the whole of their Essence, and also that tendency to hate others which flows from it.”

The Book Review

Although [The Book](#) was first published in 1966, it is as relevant as ever today. That’s because it tackles the timeless issues of human existence and tries to answer questions we’ve been asking since the beginning of time. Whatever the year, an insight into a great mind such as Watts’ is always a delight.

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Who would I recommend The Book summary to?

The 25-year old raised as a devout Christian but curious to expand her perspective, the 47-year old who has succeeded professionally and personally but finds himself in an existential crisis and anyone who is looking for guidance or inspiration on their spiritual path.