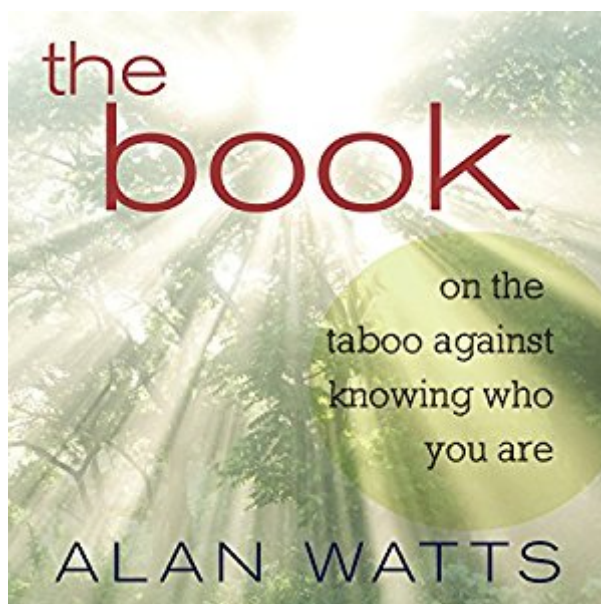


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# The Book: On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are



## Synopsis

Modern Western culture and technology is inextricably tied to the belief in the existence of a self as a separate ego, separated from and in conflict with the rest of the world. In this classic book, Watts provides a lucid and simple presentation of an alternative view based on Hindu and Vedantic philosophy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book when it was first published in 1966, re-read it after an unexpected opportunity to meet Alan Watts just before he died (in 1973), and then re-read it again recently after having recommended it highly to a close personal friend. Long ago, I became convinced that the nature and extent of any book's impact are almost entirely dependent on (a) the nature and extent of our life experiences when reading a book and (b) the nature and extent of our ability to absorb and digest whatever that book may offer. Watts's *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* offers an excellent case in point. Frankly, Watts's personal impact on me now is greater than were the first and second readings of his book. At the beginning of our brief encounter, I immediately sensed his stunning intellect and compelling decency. More impressive by far was a sense of his spirituality. It was most evident in his eyes and tone of voice. More than twenty years later, I re-read *The Book*. What follows is an admittedly clumsy attempt to share my thoughts and feelings about it. First, with regard to the title and subtitle, Watts explains that "The Book I am thinking about [and later wrote] would not be religious in the usual sense, but it would have to

discuss many things with which religions have been concerned -- the universe and man's place in it, the mysterious center of experience which we call 'I myself,' the problems of life and love, pain and death, and the whole question of whether existence has meaning has meaning in [in italics] any sense of the word."With regard to the subtitle, Watts explains that there is no need for 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."So, that was the book Watts was thinking about writing, and, the taboo to which he devotes most of his attention (directly or indirectly) throughout the book he eventually wrote.

What do I now think of this book? First, it retains its ecumenical spirit but in ways and to an extent I did not fully appreciate years ago. Watts is very respectful of all of the major religions, at least in terms of the common values they affirm; however, he also suggests (and I agree) that those values have been concealed by layer-after-layer of doctrine, policy, and procedure. Watts's point: "The standard-brand religions, whether Jewish, Christian, Mohammedan, or Buddhist, are -- as now practiced -- like exhausted mines very hard to dig." Also, I am again struck by the fact that Watts suggests a mindset which is inclusive, tolerant (and when appropriate, forgiving...especially of self), and at all times determined to continue a process of self-discovery. It seems that he wrote this book because he had become concerned about man's alienation from himself (herself) as well as from other human beings and from the physical world within which all of us struggle to achieve (in Abraham Maslow's terms) survival, then security, and eventually self-fulfillment. This is not a book for dilettantes. Watts is quite serious when posing questions so easily phrased but so difficult to answer, at least responsibly. In his view, "for thousands of years human history has been a magnificently futile conflict, a wonderfully staged panorama of triumph and tragedies based on the resolute taboo against admitting that black goes with white [i.e. that diametrically opposed forces can co-exist, indeed nourish each other]. Nothing, perhaps, ever got nowhere with so much fascinating ado." Having recently re-read this book, I was reminded of what Whitman observed in Song of Myself: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." I am also reminded of the key concept in Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death. He acknowledges that all of us die eventually. Only the suicide decides the circumstances in which physical death occurs. However, Becker suggests that there is another death that CAN be denied: That which occurs when when we become totally preoccupied

with fulfilling others' expectations of us. For me, that is the essential point in *The Book*. Watts concludes with a quotation of James Broughton's observations: "This is It and I am It and You are It and so is That and He is It and She is It and It is It and That is That." "To come on like IT -- to play at being God -- is to play the Self as a role, which is just what it isn't. When IT plays, it plays at being everything else." "Who am I?" Alan Watts offers this book which can help to answer that question. However, the inevitably perilous journey of self-discovery can only be completed by each of us. And that journey may require many years of frustration and confusion...without any guarantee that any of us will reach the destination we seek. Our choice. It always was, is...and will be.

A "hip" teacher lent me this book when I was 17, and I thought it was fascinating, entertaining, and thought-provoking. 20 years later, I was listening to a series of recorded lectures by the author on my local public radio station, and it finally dawned on me what he was talking about in the book I had read in 1971! This isn't even Watts' "best" book, but it's the best one to start with if you have reached the intellectual dead-end, as I had as a bright teenager, of "scientific" materialism. Watts writes in plain language, using everyday examples, and is simply the best translator of Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist philosophies into language that Westerners can easily understand. He is also a witty storyteller and delightful personality. If you read this, give it 20 years to sink in before you write your review. When you finally "get" it, you'll be walking 3 inches off the ground. Of course, now that everybody you meet is either into quasi-Eastern New-Age beliefs or rutted in reactionary Fundamentalist dogma, the book may read differently. But it's more likely that Watts' genuine acceptance of human foibles, egoless wisdom, light-hearted, amused honesty and absolutely penetrating insights into the nature of reality would make "The Book" accessible to any human who likes to think.

Being a "wannabe" Hippie, I knew that eventually I would have to read this book because this book was once considered a very subversive text. Nowadays, books by Wayne Dyer, Marianne Williamson, and Deepak Chopra are writing books left and right with the same kind of stuff that Alan Watts wrote about in the late 50s, early 60s. And even though I appreciate the works of Dyer, Williamson, and Chopra, their words don't seem to carry as much of a "punch" as the words of Watts. I don't know why that is. Maybe it's just my own interpretation of the material. Maybe it's because I used to listen to him late at night on the far left-end of the dial on a publically sponsored radio station listening and reading everything that I knew my dad would "hate" and "disapprove" of. The ironic thing is, is that he read and listened to Watts long before I did but like a lot of us, he got

caught up in Life and put some things aside and focused on changing diapers instead of minds, raising a family rather than raising consciousness, and yet he still held onto a few "jewels" of Truth that he wanted to impart with me, and me, being an idiot as well as a teenager (aren't they synonymous) thought and felt that somehow he was trying to be the boss of me. When I read these essays now, I am comforted by Watts' brilliant way of making the abstract, a little more "user friendly". The essay, 'How To Be A Genuine Fake' was most helpful as I was studying to become a spiritual counselor (a practitioner) for my church. It seemed as though everyone was holding themselves in some glorious light of what they were doing. It became a new game that they were playing with themselves. "Oh, when I get this practitioner license I will be this and I will be that..." And yeah, I fell for it, too, but after reading this essay a few billion times I remembered that with or without a "practitioner license" I will still be spiritual. Taking a class doesn't make you spiritual. Reading a book, going to a lecture, listening to audio programs don't make one "spiritual". Even meditation and prayer don't make us Spiritual. What makes us spiritual is knowing that we already are spiritual and here's the tricky part, EVERYONE IS. Not just some, but all. Even "Charlie" the smelly drunk that likes to go to my Monday night class. I have a feeling he is an undercover angel so even though people complain about him, I let him stay. My copy is underlined and reunderlined, it is stained with coffee and food stains, it has notes in the margins and little doodles. It is being held together by a rubber band and maybe one day I will give it to my kid or one of my nephews or nieces so they can say, "Eh, what does Uncle Johnny know about life, anyway?" Not much...not very much...Know that the seen and the unseen are One; that black dissolves into white and white dissolves into black, that your soul is part of the same soul of everyone you meet; that you are no worse than or better than anyone else. After all, it's one thing to read these incredible words and it is quite another to live them out. But don't punish yourself if you don't and don't reward yourself if you do. Everything is just as it needs to be. Peace & Blessings, to all.

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