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with startling clarity and poetic
beauty his drug-induced experiences."

— CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY

THE JOYOUS COSMOLOGY

Adventures in the Chemistry
of Consciousness

ALAN W. WATTS

With a new introduction by Daniel Pinchbeck



Foreword by Timothy Leary
and Richard Alpert

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To the people of Druid Heights

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INTRODUCTION

THE *JOYOUS COSMOLOGY* inevitably sends me into a state of poetic euphoria and anarchistic delight. Alan Watts wrote this wonderful little book in the early 1960s: that long-lost moment of innocence when psychedelic substances like LSD and psilocybin were starting to permeate the culture of the modern West but no final decision had yet been made on their utility or fate—or their legality. It was a time when a handful of philosopher-poets had the chance to muse on the power of these compounds—“to give some impression of the new world of consciousness which these substances reveal,” Watts wrote.

Reading it again, I can’t help but recall my first forays into the soul-unfolding and mind-opening qualities of the visionary plants and chemical catalysts. Those first trips unmasked the brittle delusions of our current culture and revealed that deeper dimensions of psychic reality were available for us to explore. Watts is such a fluid stylist—such a master of evanescent, evocative, pitch-perfect prose—that it is easy to gloss over or to entirely miss the explosive, radical, even revolutionary core of his message and meaning: the Western ego, the primacy of self that our entire civilization is intricately designed to shore up and protect, simply does not exist.

When one uses the magnifying glass or microscope provided by one of a number of chemical compounds that, Watts cannily noted, do not impart wisdom in itself but provide “the raw

materials of wisdom,” one finds nothing fixed, stable, permanent—no essence. Only relationship, pattern, flow. Watts’s psychedelic journeys provided experiential confirmation of the core teachings of Eastern metaphysics: that the Tao is all, that consciousness is “one without a second,” that there is no doing, only infinite reciprocity and divine play.

This book retains the freshness of precocious notebook jottings. It also, almost accidentally, gives a beautiful sense of life in the dawn of the psychedelic era on the West Coast, when groups of friends would gather in backyards beside eucalyptus groves to explore together, with the gentle humor of wise children, the infinite within. “All of us look at each other knowingly, for the feeling that we knew each other in that most distant past conceals something else—tacit, awesome, almost unmentionable—the realization that at the deep center of a time perpendicular to ordinary time we are, and always have been, one,” Watts wrote. “We acknowledge the marvelously hidden plot, the master illusion, whereby we appear to be different.”

Over the past forty or so years, we have suffered from the cultural delusion—put forth by a corporate media and government working overtime to keep consciousness locked up, as our industries suck the lifeblood from our planet—that the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s was a failure. Revisiting Watts’s *Joyous Cosmology*

reminds me that the psychedelic revolution has barely begun. The journey inward is the great adventure that remains for humanity to take together. As long as we refuse to turn our attention to the vast interior dimensions of the Psyche—"The Kingdom of God is within"—we will continue to exhaust the physical resources of the planet, cook the atmosphere, and mindlessly exterminate the myriad plant, animal, and insect species who weave the web of life with us.

When on psychedelics, we tend to find that each moment takes on archetypal, timeless, mythological significance. At one point, Watts and his friends enter into a garage full of trash, where they collapse with helpless laughter. "The culmination of civilization in monumental heaps of junk is seen, not as thoughtless ugliness, but as self-caricature—as the creation of phenomenally absurd collages and abstract sculptures in deliberate but kindly mockery of our own pretensions." Our civilization mirrors the "defended defensiveness" of the individual ego, which fortifies itself against the revelation of interdependence and interconnectivity, the plentitude and emptiness of the void.

We are lucky to have Watts's testament of his encounters: *The Joyous Cosmology* is a carrier wave of information and insight, which has lost none of its subtlety, suppleness, or zest. It is also an expression of a larger culture process, one that is unfolding over

the course of decades, through a “War on Drugs” that is secretly a war on consciousness.

Dr. Thomas B. Roberts, author of *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind*, among other works, has proposed that the rediscovery of entheogens by the modern West in the mid-twentieth century was the beginning of a “second Reformation,” destined to have repercussions at least as profound as those of the first one. In the first Reformation, the Bible was translated into the common vernacular, printed, and mass-produced, providing direct access to the “word of God,” which had previously been protected by the priests. With psychedelics, many people now have direct and unmediated access to the mystical and visionary experience, instead of reading about it in musty old tomes. As Watts’s scintillating prose makes clear—and all appearances to the contrary—the future will be psychedelic, or it will not be.

Daniel Pinchbeck, author of
*Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey
into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism*
New York City, 2013

FOREWORD

THE *JOYOUS COSMOLOGY* is a brilliant arrangement of words describing experiences for which our language has no vocabulary. To understand this wonderful but difficult book it is useful to make the artificial distinction between the external and the internal. This is, of course, exactly the distinction which Alan Watts wants us to transcend. But Mr. Watts is playing the verbal game in a Western language, and his reader can be excused for following along with conventional dichotomous models.

External and internal. Behavior and consciousness. Changing the external world has been the genius and the obsession of our civilization. In the last two centuries the Western monotheistic cultures have faced outward and moved objects about with astonishing efficiency. In more recent years, however, our culture has become aware of a disturbing imbalance. We have become aware of the undiscovered universe within, of the uncharted regions of consciousness.

This dialectic trend is not new. The cycle has occurred in the lives of many cultures and individuals. External material success is followed by disillusion and the basic “why” questions, and then by the discovery of the world within—a world infinitely more complex and rich than the artifactual structures of the outer world, which after all are, in origin, projections of human imagination. Eventually, the logical conceptual mind turns on itself, recognizes

the foolish inadequacy of the flimsy systems it imposes on the world, suspends its own rigid control, and overthrows the domination of cognitive experience.

We speak here (and Alan Watts speaks in this book) about the politics of the nervous system—certainly as complicated and certainly as important as external politics. The politics of the nervous system involves the mind against the brain, the tyrannical verbal brain disassociating itself from the organism and world of which it is a part, censoring, alerting, evaluating.

Thus appears the fifth freedom—freedom from the learned, cultural mind. The freedom to expand one's consciousness beyond artifactual cultural knowledge. The freedom to move from constant preoccupation with the verbal games—the social games, the game of self—to the joyous unity of what exists beyond.

We are dealing here with an issue that is not new, an issue that has been considered for centuries by mystics, by philosophers of the religious experience, by those rare and truly great scientists who have been able to move in and then out beyond the limits of the science game. It was seen and described clearly by the great American psychologist William James:

...our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens,

there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge toward a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance.

But what are the stimuli necessary and sufficient to overthrow the domination of the conceptual and to open up the “potential forms of consciousness”? There are many. Indian philosophers have described hundreds of methods. So have the Japanese Buddhists. The monastics of our Western religions provide more examples. Mexican healers and religious leaders from South and North American Indian groups have for centuries utilized sacred

plants to trigger off the expansion of consciousness. Recently our Western science has provided, in the form of chemicals, the most direct techniques for opening new realms of awareness.

William James used nitrous oxide and ether to “stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree.” Today the attention of psychologists, philosophers, and theologians is centering on the effects of three synthetic substances—mescaline, lysergic acid, and psilocybin.

What are these substances? Medicines or drugs or sacramental foods? It is easier to say what they are not. They are not narcotics, nor intoxicants, nor energizers, nor anaesthetics, nor tranquilizers. They are, rather, biochemical keys which unlock experiences shatteringly new to most Westerners.

For the last two years, staff members of the Center for Research in Personality at Harvard University have engaged in systematic experiments with these substances. Our first inquiry into the biochemical expansion of consciousness has been a study of the reactions of Americans in a supportive, comfortable naturalistic setting. We have had the opportunity of participating in over one thousand individual administrations. From our observations, from interviews and reports, from analysis of questionnaire data, and from pre- and postexperimental differences in personality test results, certain conclusions have emerged. (1) These substances

do alter consciousness. There is no dispute on this score. (2) It is meaningless to talk more specifically about the “effect of the drug.” Set and setting, expectation, and atmosphere account for all specificity of reaction. There is no “drug reaction” but always setting-plus-drug. (3) In talking about potentialities it is useful to consider not just the setting-plus-drug but rather the potentialities of the human cortex to create images and experiences far beyond the narrow limitations of words and concepts. Those of us on this research project spend a good share of our working hours listening to people talk about the effect and use of consciousness-altering drugs. If we substitute the words *human cortex* for *drug* we can then agree with any statement made about the potentialities—for good or evil, for helping or hurting, for loving or fearing. Potentialities of the cortex, not of the drug. The drug is just an instrument.

In analyzing and interpreting the results of our studies we looked first to the conventional models of modern psychology—psychoanalytic, behavioristic—and found these concepts quite inadequate to map the richness and breadth of expanded consciousness. To understand our findings we have finally been forced back on a language and point of view quite alien to us who are trained in the traditions of mechanistic objective psychology. We have had to return again and again to the nondualistic conceptions of Eastern philosophy, a theory of mind made more explicit and

familiar in our Western world by Bergson, Aldous Huxley, and Alan Watts. In the first part of this book Mr. Watts presents with beautiful clarity this theory of consciousness, which we have seen confirmed in the accounts of our research subjects—philosophers, unlettered convicts, housewives, intellectuals, alcoholics. The leap across entangling thickets of the verbal, to identify with the totality of the experienced, is a phenomenon reported over and over by these persons.

Alan Watts spells out in eloquent detail his drug-induced visionary moments. He is, of course, attempting the impossible—to describe in words (which always lie) that which is beyond words. But how well he can do it!

Alan Watts is one of the great reporters of our times. He has an intuitive sensitivity for news, for the crucial issues and events of the century. And he has along with this the verbal equipment of a poetic philosopher to teach and inform. Here he has given us perhaps the best statement on the subject of space-age mysticism, more daring than the two classic works of Aldous Huxley because Watts follows Mr. Huxley's lead and pushes beyond. The recognition of the love aspects of the mystical experience and the implications for new forms of social communication are especially important.

You are holding in your hand a great human document. But

unless you are one of the few Westerners who have (accidentally or through chemical good fortune) experienced a mystical minute of expanded awareness, you will probably not understand what the author is saying. Too bad, but still not a cause for surprise. The history of ideas reminds us that new concepts and new visions have always been non-understood. We cannot understand that for which we have no words. But Alan Watts is playing the book game, the word game, and the reader is his contracted partner.

But listen. Be prepared. There are scores of great lines in this book. Dozens of great ideas. Too many. Too compressed. They glide by too quickly. Watch for them.

If you catch even a few of these ideas, you will find yourself asking the questions which we ask ourselves as we look over our research data: Where do we go from here? What is the application of these new wonder medicines? Can they do more than provide memorable moments and memorable books?

The answer will come from two directions. We must provide more and more people with these experiences and have them tell us, as Alan Watts does here, what they experienced. (There will hardly be a lack of volunteers for this ecstatic voyage. Ninety-one percent of our subjects are eager to repeat and to share the experience with their family and friends.) We must also encourage systematic objective research by scientists who have taken the drug

themselves and have come to know the difference between inner and outer, between consciousness and behavior. Such research should explore the application of these experiences to the problems of modern living—in education, religion, creative industry, creative arts.

There are many who believe that we stand at an important turning point in man's power to control and expand his awareness. Our research provides tentative grounds for such optimism. *The Joyous Cosmology* is solid testimony for the same happy expectations.

Timothy Leary, PhD, and Richard Alpert, PhD
Harvard University, January 1962

PREFACE

IN *THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION* Aldous Huxley has given us a superbly written account of the effects of mescaline upon a highly sensitive person. It was a record of his first experience of this remarkable transformation of consciousness, and by now, through subsequent experiments, he knows that it can lead to far deeper insights than his book described. While I cannot hope to surpass Aldous Huxley as a master of English prose, I feel that the time is ripe for an account of some of the deeper, or higher, levels of insight that can be reached through these consciousness-changing “drugs” when accompanied with sustained philosophical reflection by a person who is in search, not of kicks, but of understanding. I should perhaps add that, for me, philosophical reflection is barren when divorced from poetic imagination, for we proceed to understanding of the world upon two legs, not one.

It is now a commonplace that there is a serious lack of communication between scientists and laymen on the theoretical level, for the layman does not understand the mathematical language in which the scientist thinks. For example, the concept of curved space cannot be represented in any image that is intelligible to the senses. But I am still more concerned with the gap between theoretical description and direct experience among scientists themselves. Western science is now delineating a new concept of man, not as a solitary ego within a wall of flesh, but as an organism which is what

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