

"Pathbreaking." —MARIA POPOVA, *BRAIN PICKINGS*

The
MEANING
of
HAPPINESS

THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM OF THE
SPIRIT IN MODERN PSYCHOLOGY AND
THE WISDOM OF THE EAST

ALAN WATTS

Author of *The Wisdom of Insecurity*

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ALAN WATTS

Third Edition
Foreword by Joan Watts



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FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

I was two years old in 1940 when *The Meaning of Happiness* was originally published. I don't remember ever reading the book or having a copy of it until just recently. My father, Alan Watts, was all of twenty-four years old when he wrote it, and my mother, Eleanor (his first wife), to whom he dedicated it, was barely twenty. The copy I have now is the second edition, published by James Ladd Delkin in 1953, and, ironically, inscribed to Alan's third wife, Mary Jane, in 1959. I often wondered about the title of the book and whether he developed his theory on happiness to understand the depression and resulting unhappiness Eleanor dealt with throughout her life. He mentioned in his autobiography, *In My Own Way*, that Eleanor was involved in reading the manuscript and encouraged him to be honest and to really think through what he meant.

Alan, at the time, told his parents he was developing "a philosophy of acceptance" for a new book. The title then became *The Anatomy of Acceptance*, which the publisher, Harper, changed to *The Meaning of Happiness*. Reading it, I've tried to wrap my head around the fact that this man understood what he did about the human condition at the young age of twenty-four. He looks at happiness from every possible angle. His initial premise for the book was to address the question, "What do Eastern and Western psychology, taken together, have to say about the elusive and pressing subject of human happiness?" The concept of duality, a common theme in his writings, emerges here with the thesis that in order to experience happiness, one must suffer sadness and that such opposites eventually become complementary.

Alan wrote in a letter to his parents in June 1940, just two months after the book came out, "When I finished that book, I thought it reasonably free from inadequacies, but now, each week shows me another hole in it. There are things left unsaid and I say to myself, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy.'"

At the time he wrote this book, Alan admits he was somewhat under the influence of Carl Jung, but then notes a sense of inadequacy—that he, Alan, had in fact described a psychological process without any metaphysical foundation. In retrospect, Alan felt that Jung's refusal to relate his psychology to any one system of metaphysics became his own book's profound weakness.

Despite all that, my feeling is that *The Meaning of Happiness* is as timely in its philosophical premise as it was nearly eighty years ago. I leave subsequent interpretation to the reader.

Joan Watts
Livingston, Montana
June 2018

PREFACE TO THE SECOND (1952) EDITION

This book first appeared in the spring of 1940, at the very moment when the Second World War broke loose in all its violence. Despite the fact that it was published at that most inauspicious time and the fact that its title gave it the outward appearance of a type of “inspirational literature” far removed from its inner content, *The Meaning of Happiness* has been “sold out” for many years—during which I have received repeated requests for its republication.

I have hesitated to comply with this demand because in so many ways my ideas have gone far beyond the philosophy of a book written when I was only twenty-four years old. Yet this book and an even earlier book, *The Spirit of Zen*, remain the favorites of many readers. Setting aside, however, certain immaturities of style and organization, as well as of certain lines of development, the essential theme of this book is, for me, as valid and as important as ever. It has continued as the basic insight of all that I have written subsequently—books in which I have tried to express it in terms of a variety of differing philosophical and religious “languages.”

This theme is concerned with the realization of “happiness” in the Aristotelian and Thomistic sense of man’s true end or destiny, in which sense happiness means union with God, or, in Oriental terms, harmony with the Tao, or moksha, or nirvana. The point on which I have insisted in many different ways is, in brief, that this special and supreme order of happiness is not a result to be attained through action, but a fact to be realized through knowledge. The sphere of action is to express it, not to gain it.

The exposition of this theme involves a number of peculiar logical and psychological difficulties. From a rigorously logical point of view, the words in which this theme is stated mean exactly nothing. In the terms of the great Oriental philosophies, man’s unhappiness is rooted in the feeling of anxiety which attends his sense of being an isolated individual or ego,

separate from “life” or “reality” as a whole. On the other hand, happiness—a sense of harmony, completion, and wholeness—comes with the realization that the feeling of isolation is an illusion. In fact, that which feels itself to be the separate, individual consciousness is identical with that universal and undivided Reality of which all things are manifestations.

The Meaning of Happiness explains that the psychological equivalent of this doctrine is a state of mind called “total acceptance,” a yes-saying to everything that we experience, the unreserved acceptance of what we are, of what we feel and know at this and every moment. To say, as in the Vedanta, that “All is Brahman,” is to say that this whole universe is to be accepted. To put it in another way, at each moment we are what we experience, and there is no real possibility of being other than what we are. Wisdom therefore consists in accepting what we are, rather than in struggling fruitlessly to be something else, as if it were possible to run away from one’s own feet.

But if you cannot run away from your feet, you cannot run after them either. If it is impossible to escape from reality, from what *is now*, it is equally impossible to accept or embrace it. You cannot kiss your own lips. Speaking logically, the idea of accepting one’s experience in its totality means nothing. For “yes” has meaning only in relation to “no,” so that if I say “yes” to *everything* the word ceases to have any content. To abolish all valleys is to get rid of all mountains. By the same logic, it is equally meaningless to say “All is Brahman,” for statements which are applied to all experiences whatsoever add nothing to our knowledge. When I have said that this whole universe is life, reality, Tao, or Brahman, I have said no more than that everything is everything!

It is easy, then, to sympathize with the reviewer of this book who said, “The mountain has labored and brought forth a mouse.” Yet he was mistaken in one slight respect. There was no mouse. And in this tremendous trifle lies the real significance of the book—the meaning which was hidden between the lines because it could not be stated in the words. For between the lines is the paper, the seeming emptiness or nothing, on which the words are printed and which is quite essential to their being printed at all. In a rather similar way, Reality or Brahman is the essential basis of every thing and experience. If I say that paper underlies every word on this page, I might perhaps be understood as saying something like this:

Paper underlies every word on this page
Paper Paper Paper Paper Paper Paper Paper

which is neither sensible nor true.

Just as the words cannot “utter” the paper beneath them, because the paper is not another word, so logic cannot express Reality. In logic, words mean nothing if they do not describe particular experiences. But just as the paper is not a word, Reality or Brahman is not a particular experience. The statement “All is Brahman” is indeed nonsense if “Brahman” is held, like most other words, to denote a special experience. Yet if Brahman is nothing that we can experience, why trouble to talk about it at all? Am I not saying a great many words about something of which I know nothing?

Here is the whole point of the nonexistent mouse over which the mountain labored. I do not know Brahman just as I do not see sight. If I *am* Reality, I cannot grasp it. The life, the Tao, which is the experience of this and all moments I can neither escape nor accept. Every attempt to escape from life or to accept life is as much a vicious circle, as plain an absurdity as trying to know knowledge, to feel feeling, or to burn fire.

It is only when you seek it that you lose it.
You cannot take hold of it, nor can you get rid of it;
While you can do neither, it goes on its own way.
You remain silent and it speaks; you speak and it is silent.

So what?

So that is what millions of human beings make themselves perfectly miserable trying to do. The laboring of the mountain is the fantastic effort of man to grasp the mystery of life, to find God, to attain happiness, to lay hold on absolute, eternal Being. He clutches at his own hand. He seeks what he has never lost. He suffocates from holding his breath.

This absurdity is only possible on the basis of the feeling that “I” am one thing and “life” or “reality” another, that the knower is separate from his knowledge, the known. This book suggests a total acceptance of experience by way of what is called in Buddhism *upaya*—a device for bringing about an awakening. The hope is that in *trying* to accept life totally one will discover, not in theory alone but in fact, that “whosoever would save his life shall lose it,” because one is attempting the impossible task of self-love. The psyche of the average man is in a perfect knot of tension through trying to lay a firm, permanent hold on the life which is its own essence. The attempt to “accept” life tightens this knot to the point