



REBEL MASTERS

ALAN WATTS

THE WISDOM OF LETTING GO

The man who revealed that life cannot be possessed
without being lost.

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There is a moment in nearly every human life when effort stops working.

The strategies that once produced success no longer produce peace. The intelligence that solved a thousand problems cannot solve the one now standing before us. Influence cannot command it. Money cannot purchase our way around it. Reputation cannot protect us from it. The people we love cannot endure it on our behalf.

And so we tighten our grip.

We work harder. Explain more. Defend ourselves more carefully. Attempt to control the people, circumstances, and outcomes upon which our sense of security has become dependent. We call it responsibility. We call it leadership. We call it devotion.

But beneath many of these noble words is something far more primitive:

Fear.

Fear of losing what we built. Fear of becoming irrelevant. Fear of being abandoned. Fear that if life does not follow the architecture we designed for it, everything we have believed about ourselves may collapse.

Alan Watts understood this fear.

More importantly, he understood the strange law beneath it:

The more desperately we attempt to possess life, the more life escapes us.

We cannot close our hands around water without forcing it between our fingers. We cannot hold a breath indefinitely without turning the very thing that sustains us into the source of our suffering. We cannot demand that a song remain on one beautiful note without destroying the music.

Life survives through movement. Love survives through freedom. Identity survives by changing.

And yet the human mind wants permanence in a universe whose first law appears to be transformation.

This is the conflict Watts spent much of his life illuminating. He did not speak to the West merely about Zen, Taoism, Hindu philosophy, or the illusion of the ego. He spoke to the frightened controller within us - the part that believes peace will finally arrive when the world becomes predictable.

It never does.

Peace comes when we no longer require it to.

THE MAN WHO LAUGHED AT CERTAINTY

Alan Watts was born in England in 1915 and became one of the most recognizable interpreters of Eastern philosophy for the modern Western world.

He was a student of religion without becoming obedient to any single religious authority. He entered the Christian priesthood, left it, and eventually became what he playfully called a

"philosophical entertainer." He distrusted excessive solemnity, especially the solemnity of people who claimed to possess the truth.

Watts did not merely teach ideas. He loosened them.

He took concepts the West had made rigid - God, morality, identity, purpose, enlightenment - and allowed air to move through them again. He showed that spiritual seriousness could itself become another performance of the ego: the self attempting to become important by appearing to transcend itself.

That may have been one of his most subversive insights.

Even the desire to destroy the ego can become the ego's greatest project.

The mind divides itself in two. One part becomes the judge, the other the accused. One becomes the master, the other the problem to be corrected. Then the self attempts to control the self, like a hand trying to grasp itself or teeth trying to bite themselves.

Watts saw the comedy in our predicament.

We search for what is doing the searching. We attempt to become what we already are. We postpone living until we have learned how to live.

Then we turn enlightenment into another future accomplishment and wonder why it remains beyond us.

His laughter was not mockery. It was liberation.

He invited us to consider that existence might not be an examination we are failing. Perhaps life is not a grim assignment imposed upon us by a distant authority. Perhaps it is closer to music, theater, play, or dance - something whose meaning exists in its unfolding.

A song is not considered successful because it arrives at its final note as quickly as possible. A dance is not performed merely to reach a particular place on the floor.

Yet much of modern life is organized precisely this way.

We hurry through childhood to become adults. We hurry through work to reach retirement. We hurry through conversations to make our point. We hurry through meals, relationships, cities, victories, and even vacations, photographing the experience before we have actually inhabited it.

We treat the present as if it were a corridor leading somewhere more important.

Then, near the end, we discover that the corridor was our life.

THE HUMAN COMPULSION TO HOLD

We do not cling because we are foolish. We cling because we have loved. We cling because we have suffered. We cling because uncertainty has wounded us before, and the mind has concluded that greater control might prevent the wound from returning.

This is why letting go cannot be reduced to a beautiful phrase on a wall.

There are things human beings should hold faithfully: responsibility, integrity, promises, principles, and the protection of those entrusted to our care. A philosophy of surrender that

disappears when confronted by duty is not wisdom. It is avoidance wearing spiritual clothing. But there is a profound difference between holding a responsibility and trying to possess an outcome.

One belongs to character. The other belongs to fear.

We are responsible for the quality of our action. We are not sovereign over every consequence that follows it.

We can tell the truth and still be misunderstood. We can love deeply and still be left. We can build intelligently and still lose. We can lead courageously and still fail. We can care for the body and still become ill. We can do everything within our power and discover that our power was never absolute.

This does not make our choices meaningless. It makes humility necessary.

For much of my life, I understood power through creation. I built companies, organizations, leaders, opportunities, and movements. I watched an idea become language, language become belief, and belief become a force capable of moving thousands of people.

Creation teaches a person something magnificent: that vision matters.

But if we are not careful, it also teaches us something dangerous: that because we can influence reality, we should be able to control it.

Influence is real. Control is largely imagined.

The confusion between them is responsible for an extraordinary amount of human suffering.

THE LAW OF THE CLOSED HAND

I have watched founders build something extraordinary and then slowly suffocate it.

They began with courage, openness, and imagination. They attracted talented people because their vision created possibility. But as the organization grew, so did the founder's fear of losing control.

Questions began to feel like disloyalty. Independent thinking became insubordination. Honest disagreement became betrayal.

The founder who once created leaders began surrounding himself with agreement. He tightened his grip upon the company, the narrative, and the people - and then wondered why the life was disappearing from what he had built.

This pattern is not limited to business. It happens in governments, religions, families, and relationships.

Fear always attempts to preserve the form after the spirit has begun to leave it.

A leader cannot possess loyalty. The moment loyalty must be extracted through pressure, humiliation, dependency, or fear, it is no longer loyalty. It is compliance.

A parent cannot possess a child's future. A teacher cannot possess a student's mind. A spiritual authority cannot possess another person's conscience. And no human being can possess the heart of another.

The closed hand may prevent something from leaving for a time. It also prevents anything new from entering.

This is the paradox of possession: what we are afraid to lose is often damaged by the manner in which we attempt to keep it.

Leadership becomes control. Protection becomes confinement. Conviction becomes dogma. Love becomes ownership. Success becomes a prison guarded by the person who achieved it.

The tragedy is not that we care too much. It is that fear gradually corrupts the form our caring takes.

WHEN LIFE PERFORMS THE SURRENDER

There are things we release willingly. Then there are things life removes from our hands.

I have known the difference.

There was a period when structures that had taken years to build began collapsing almost simultaneously. Business pressures, financial threats, legal conflict, fractured loyalties, failing transactions, and the death of my father converged into what felt less like a difficult season than the dismantling of an entire identity.

It was not one loss. It was a world coming apart.

Until that time, I had spent much of my life believing that sufficient effort, intelligence, courage, and will could find a path through nearly anything. This belief had served me. It had helped me build, lead, survive, and create.

But every strength contains the possibility of its own distortion.

Determination can become resistance. Responsibility can become the belief that everything depends upon us. Vision can become attachment to one particular future. Endurance can become the refusal to recognize that something has ended.

I fought the dismantling because I believed surrender would mean defeat. I thought letting go would invalidate everything I had built, everything I had sacrificed, and perhaps even the man I had become.

But life was not asking me to declare that the past had been meaningless.

It was asking whether I could remain alive when the identity formed by that past could no longer carry me.

There comes a point when the structure we are attempting to save becomes the structure that is burying us.

And life, in a mercy that initially feels like violence, begins removing it.

The self we defend so desperately is not a permanent object. It is a pattern - a story continuously assembled from memory, expectation, relationship, and social recognition.

When the roles change, we feel that we are disappearing.

When the company is lost, who is the builder? When authority is removed, who is the leader? When the relationship changes, who is the beloved? When reputation fractures, who are we

without the agreement of the crowd? When the father dies, what happens to the son?

These are not abstract questions. They are initiations.

Life was not only taking things from me. It was separating me from the belief that those things were me.

The surrender did not arrive as a moment of elegant enlightenment. It came through exhaustion. I simply reached the end of my argument with reality.

I had fought what was happening long enough.

Finally, something within me said:

All right. I will follow.

That sentence did not restore what had been lost. It did something more important. It restored movement.

I had confused surrender with lying down before life. Instead, surrender allowed me to stand inside life without demanding that it reverse itself before I would agree to continue.

The external world did not immediately become easier. But the war within me began to end.

LETTING GO WITHOUT GIVING UP

This distinction is essential.

Resignation says, "Nothing can be done."

Surrender says, "I will do what can be done without pretending that I command what happens next."

Resignation withdraws its energy from life. Surrender releases its argument with life. Resignation is passive. Surrender may require the most courageous action we have ever taken.

Letting go does not mean refusing to fight for something worthy. It means no longer requiring the battle to validate our identity. It does not mean abandoning our children, our responsibilities, our companies, our bodies, or those we love. It means serving them without turning them into objects through which we attempt to secure ourselves.

Mature surrender is not actionlessness. It is action without psychological captivity to the result.

We still prepare. We still build. We still protect. We still confront. We still leave when leaving is necessary and remain when remaining is honorable.

But we stop confusing our preferred outcome with the only outcome through which life can retain meaning.

This is extraordinarily difficult for ambitious people.

A person who has repeatedly transformed intention into achievement naturally comes to trust the will. And the will is a magnificent instrument. Almost nothing of consequence is built without it.

But the will was never intended to govern the entire universe.

Wisdom is knowing where effort has authority and where it does not.

Use the will to discipline your action. Do not use it to demand obedience from reality.

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT POSSESSION

I have spent years around executives, entrepreneurs, founders, and field leaders. I have watched people at the height of their influence and others in the private terror of losing it.

Power does not always corrupt a person. Sometimes it reveals the fear that success had temporarily concealed.

When leaders feel secure, they can be generous. They invite thought, elevate capable people, and permit talent to breathe. When they become afraid, the same leaders may begin testing loyalty, centralizing decisions, controlling the narrative, and treating independent judgment as a threat.

They call this protecting the mission. Often, they are protecting themselves from the realization that the mission may no longer require them in the same way.

The insecure leader asks: How do I keep these people loyal to me?

The mature leader asks: How do I remain loyal to what these people are capable of becoming?

One attempts to create dependence. The other creates capacity.

This is leadership with an open hand.

It does not mean weak standards. It does not mean allowing chaos, avoiding accountability, or tolerating betrayal. Boundaries are not possession. Consequences are not control. Clear leadership remains necessary wherever people gather around a purpose.

But there is a difference between directing an organization and needing to dominate every person within it.

The highest expression of leadership is not creating something that cannot live without you.

It is helping create something alive enough to continue beyond you.

The leader who must remain the center has not built a movement. He has built an orbit.

And every orbit eventually collapses when its central body can no longer hold it together.

Love expresses itself differently. It prepares people to stand. Fear makes certain that they never can.

LOVE WITH AN OPEN HAND

Nowhere is letting go more difficult than in love.

We speak of love as though it were synonymous with union, permanence, proximity, and possession. We say "my wife," "my husband," "my partner," "my children," and "my family." The language is understandable, but it can quietly convince us that relationship grants ownership.

It does not.

Another human being may give us devotion, years, intimacy, children, forgiveness, sacrifice, and sacred access to the private rooms of the heart.

Still, that person never becomes our property.

History does not create ownership. Sacrifice does not create ownership. Desire does not create ownership. Even love does not create ownership.

Love may ask for loyalty. It may require truth. It may establish boundaries and recognize that certain choices make a shared life impossible. Letting go does not mean accepting deception or pretending that abandonment does not wound.

But love ceases to be love when its governing question becomes:

How do I make this person become what I need in order to feel secure?

I have seen this impulse in others. I have also seen it in myself.

It is easier to recognize control when someone else is exercising it. It is far more difficult when our own control arrives disguised as devotion, protection, history, obligation, or the insistence that we simply know what is best.

Yet love cannot be forced into the shape of our fear without being diminished.

To love with an open hand is not to love less. It is to love without making captivity the evidence that love exists.

This may be among the most difficult spiritual practices available to a human being: to care profoundly, to speak truthfully, to make our desires known, to remain answerable for our promises - and still recognize the sovereignty of another soul.

Letting go does not always mean leaving. Sometimes it means remaining without controlling. Sometimes it means forgiving without forgetting what the experience taught us. Sometimes it means accepting that love is real even when it cannot produce the life we imagined. Sometimes it means releasing another person from the obligation to repair every wound their choices awakened within us.

And sometimes, with terrible tenderness, it means allowing an ending to be an ending.

The immature heart says: If I cannot keep it, it was never mine.

The awakened heart begins to understand: Because it was never mine, I was able to love it.

THE SELF THAT CANNOT BE SECURED

Watts's deepest challenge was not merely that we cling to possessions, relationships, and outcomes.

It was that the one doing the clinging may not exist in the way we imagine.

We experience ourselves as isolated beings enclosed within the skin: separate minds confronting an external universe. Nature appears to be something around us rather than

something expressing itself as us.

But Watts repeatedly returned to a different vision.

A wave is not separate from the ocean simply because it has a temporary shape. A tree is not an independent object that happens to exist in soil, sunlight, rain, atmosphere, and time. Remove those relationships and there is no tree.

The same is true of us.

We do not arrive into the world as though delivered into a foreign location. We arise from it.

We are formed by food, breath, ancestry, language, culture, memory, relationship, gravity, sunlight, and the countless lives that made our own lives possible. The boundary between self and world is useful, but it is not absolute.

We are not merely observers of existence. We are events within it.

This changes the meaning of letting go.

If I believe I am an isolated thing standing against the universe, surrender feels like annihilation. But if I am a living expression of the same reality I have been resisting, surrender becomes participation.

The wave does not fail when it returns to the sea. Its return was contained within its rising.

This does not erase individuality. A wave has shape. A person has character, history, responsibility, and choice. But individuality does not require separation any more than a single note must be separated from the composition in order to be heard.

Our uniqueness is not diminished by belonging. It becomes possible because we belong.

THE DANGER OF BEAUTIFUL PHILOSOPHY

Watts must also be tested against life.

It is easy to speak of the world as play when another person is burying a child. It is easy to celebrate impermanence when it is someone else's home being destroyed, someone else's body failing, or someone else's life collapsing.

No legitimate wisdom should be used to anesthetize suffering or accuse the wounded of insufficient enlightenment.

Grief is not spiritual failure. Fear is not proof of unconsciousness. Resistance is often the nervous system's attempt to survive what the intellect has not yet learned how to hold.

There are losses we do not gracefully release. They tear themselves away from us, leaving injury where attachment once lived.

The purpose of wisdom is not to prevent us from feeling that injury. It is to help us avoid building our permanent identity around it.

We do not honor the dead by refusing to live. We do not prove the depth of our love by remaining eternally broken. We do not demonstrate loyalty to a former life by rejecting every life that might follow it.

Letting go is not the denial of grief. It is grief completing its movement through us.

Nor should acceptance become an excuse for tolerating injustice. There are moments when surrender means accepting that a wrong exists so clearly that we finally stop explaining it away and act.

Reality must be accepted before it can be intelligently changed.

The activist who refuses to see the world as it is becomes ineffective. The leader who cannot face the true condition of an organization cannot save it. The person who will not accept what a relationship has become cannot decide honestly whether to rebuild it or leave.

Acceptance is not approval. It is the end of distortion.

THE WISDOM OF PARTICIPATION

Watts understood that life is not an object we can stand outside of and manage.

We are already inside it.

This is why so much of our anxiety is futile. The mind attempts to secure the future before allowing us to inhabit the present, but the future never arrives as the future. When it arrives, it is another present moment - often overlooked while we prepare for the one after it.

I know the seduction of the next achievement. The next company. The next country. The next mission. The next act of restoration.

Vision has carried me across borders and through circumstances that would have defeated a less persistent version of myself. I would never argue against vision.

But I have learned that a future can inspire life or consume it.

There is a difference between building tomorrow and sacrificing every today to it.

We imagine we are postponing peace until the work is complete. The work is never complete.

There will always be another obligation, another fracture requiring attention, another person we hope to help, another possibility asking to be built.

If we cannot enter life until everything is resolved, we will never enter it.

This is perhaps what it means to participate rather than possess.

To work without making work the price of our worth. To love without making another person responsible for completing us. To lead without needing to control every response. To grieve without turning sorrow into identity. To succeed without demanding that success protect us from change. To release without pretending nothing mattered.

Letting go does not mean that nothing matters.

It means that something can matter profoundly without becoming our property.

WHAT REMAINS WHEN WE RELEASE

We spend much of life asking what we might lose if we let go.

We rarely ask what our grip is already costing us.

How much beauty have we missed while trying to preserve it? How much love have we frightened while trying to secure it? How many people have we diminished while attempting to lead them? How many possible futures have we refused because they did not resemble the one we had chosen? How much of ourselves have we exhausted defending an identity that life was asking us to outgrow?

There is a kind of death that occurs before the body dies.

It is the death of the version of ourselves we can no longer honestly remain.

We experience it as catastrophe because we do not yet recognize it as space.

But space is where the next life begins.

Not a life without responsibility. Not a life without heartbreak. Not a life protected from consequence, mortality, or uncertainty.

A life no longer spent arguing that impermanence is a personal injustice.

The wisdom of letting go is not that we should become indifferent to the world.

It is that we can finally touch the world without attempting to imprison it.

We can hold the child while knowing the child will grow. We can build the company while knowing it will change. We can inhabit the body while knowing it will age. We can love another while knowing neither history nor desire can guarantee tomorrow. We can stand inside one magnificent moment without asking it to become permanent before we allow ourselves to receive it.

This is not detachment from life.

It is intimacy with life as it actually is.

Surrender is not the abandonment of power.

It is the abandonment of the illusion that power can make life obey us.

And once that illusion breaks, something unexpected remains.

Presence.

Not the passivity of a person who has ceased to care, but the aliveness of someone who no longer needs reality to become something else before he can meet it.

Perhaps this is what Alan Watts was trying to help us remember beneath the laughter, paradox, and play:

We were never standing outside the universe trying to find our way into it. We were never separate from the river we were attempting to control.

We were the river.

Life does not ask to be conquered. It asks to be entered.

Love does not ask to be possessed. It asks to be lived.

The future does not ask to be secured. It asks to be met.

And the self does not need to be protected from every ending, because beneath everything that can be taken from us is something that was never an object, never an achievement, and never ours to hold.

There comes a time when the hand must open.

Not because what it held was unworthy.

Because it was sacred.

And sacred things are not truly encountered through possession. They are encountered through presence.

We do not keep life by holding it.

We receive it by letting it move through us.

And only when we stop demanding that the moment remain can we discover that it was never leaving us.

It was becoming us.

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