

Alan Watts:

## Transcript of 'Conversation with Myself'

Recorded in 1970, *'Conversation with Myself'* is a video essay published two years after Watts' death. In the essay, Watts outlines his view of how our failure to recognise our nature as natural beings is a block to our ability to create ecological change. This extract reproduces the main points from his video essay.

View the full programme on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ylqPkuCJPBs>

It's astonishing. All this is only twenty or thirty minutes from the heart of San Francisco. Not a human habitation in sight anywhere.

I've been living out here for some months, to write, and to absorb an atmosphere that is different from the city. To try and find out what is the essential difference between the world of nature and the world of man. Because there's an obvious difference like the difference of artistic styles.

No one for example would confuse a painting by Leonardo with a painting by Picasso; or music by Bach with music by Shostakovich. And in the same way that seems to be, a complete difference of style between the things that human beings do, and the things that nature does. Even though human beings of themselves part of nature.

On the one hand nature is wiggly. Everything wiggles. The outlines of the hills, the shapes of the trees, the way the wind brushes the grass, the clouds, tracts of streams. It all wiggles. And for some reason or other, we find wiggly things very difficult to keep track of.

And you know we say to people keep still so that I can see you. keep still for the camera. And we say, 'well let's get things straightened out', 'let's get this ironed out', 'let's get it all squared away'. And then somehow we think we understand things when we have translated them into terms of straight lines and squares.

Maybe that's why they call a rather rigid people squares.

But it doesn't fit nature.

You know wherever human beings have been around, and done their thing, you'll find rectangles. We live in boxes; our streets, especially across states like Kansas and Nebraska, are laid out in a grid pattern. Why they even dropped a grid pattern on top of San Francisco; with all those hills, so that cars run away. Because it seems that the human being really has a very simple kind of mind, and all this wiggleness is too complicated.

I don't think it really is complicated. Because after all, it's very simple to move; say to raise something, or to open and close your hand, it's perfectly easy. Because we don't have to think

about it. Things become complicated only when we think about them, and that's because we are trying to translate them into a form of life which is very much simpler and cruder than the forms of life we're talking about.

A triangle is very much simpler and cruder than a mountain, even though you may represent a mountain with a triangle. Human beings are just as wiggly as nature, and our brains are an incredible mess of wiggles, and that's the part of ourselves that we understand least of all.

I'm afraid the problem is partly due to Mr. Euclid who invented geometry, because he didn't really measure the Earth. He measured and gave us ideas about the various simple forms in his own mind. And perhaps we should come to the conclusion that he really had a rather weakened intellect. Because sometimes, when I'm in the middle of all this, I feel as if I were in the middle of an amazing brain.

In other words, the brain is a network of interconnected neurons, and each one of those neurons is a fairly simple affair because it either fires or it doesn't fire: It gives you the message 'on' or 'off', 'yes' or 'no'. But what we call things, the plants, birds, trees, are far more complicated than the neuron; and there are billions of them. And they are all living together in a network.

Just as there is an interdependence of flowers and bees: Where there are no flowers, there are no bees; and where there are no bees, there are no flowers. They're really one organism. And so in the same way, everything in nature depends on everything else. So it's interconnected. And so the many, many patterns of interconnections locked it all together, into a unity which is, however, much too complicated for us to think about; except in very, very simple crude ways.

But I am part of all this. I am, as it were, one of the cells in this tremendous brain which I can't understand because the part cannot comprehend the whole. Yet at the same time I don't feel, like so many people seem to feel, that I'm a foreigner or a stranger in this world. It's aesthetic forms somehow appeal to me more than most of the aesthetic forms which men have produced.

I feel in it as if, in the same way when you see a flower in a field, It's really the whole field that is flowering, because the flower couldn't exist in that particular place without the special surroundings of the field that it has. You only find flowers in surroundings which will support them. So in the same way you only find human beings on a planet of this kind, with an atmosphere of this kind, with temperature of this kind, supplied by a convenient neighbouring star. And so just as the flower is a flowering of the field, I feel myself as a personing, a manning, a peopling of the whole universe.

In other words, I seem like everything else, to be a centre, a sort of vortex, at which the whole energy of the universe realizes itself, comes alive, a sort of aperture through which the whole universe is conscious of itself. In other words, I go with it as a centre to a circumference.

You know the astrologers, in theory at least, may not have been so far wrong when, in trying to draw a picture of a human mind or soul, they drew a very crude map of the whole universe centred on the time and place of the birth of that particular person. It's not a bad idea, but I don't think the astrologers know how to read their maps, because the maps are too crude. But the essential point is obviously that each one of us, not only human beings, but every leaf, every weed, exists in the way it does only because everything else around it does.

In other words, there's a relationship between the centre and the circumference, which is rather like the relationship between the poles of a magnet. Without the centre no circumference; without the circumference no centre. And although we say of poles that they're the poles apart, that is to say extremely different, there's something between them. Just as the north and south poles of a magnet are united by the magnet, so the individual in the universe are inseparable.

But the curious thing is that while that's rather easy to see in theory, very few people are aware of it in an important, strong way; like one is aware of blue in blue sky, or of the heat in fire. It's more of an idea than it is of a realization.

And so it strikes me more and more, that our failure to feel at home in this astonishing brain in which we live, is the result of a basic initial mistake in our thinking about the world; and is in turn the cause of what is beginning to look like the failure of our technology. Of the fact that everything we're doing to try to improve the world was a success in the short run, made amazing initial improvements; but in the long run, we seem to be destroying the planet by our very efforts to control it, and improve it.

And it strikes me that is because we are really too simple-minded to understand what we're doing when we interfere with the natural world, strongly, and on a vast scale. We don't really interfere with it because that would suggest that we were something different from it; something outside. But I think what we're doing is we are understanding it in terms of languages, numbers, in terms of a logic, which is too simple for the job. Too crude for the job.

To begin with, we understand everything in terms of words or numbers, and they're stretched out in rows; in lines. And our eyes have to scan those lines in order to understand them. But when I scan this view I don't do it line by line by line; I see the whole thing at once. I take it in with, as it were, a wide-angle lens. But when I try to understand the world through literature, and through mathematics, I have to scan lines.

You know that's why it takes us so long to get educated in school, because our eyes have to scan and organize miles and miles of print. And that takes us 20 years or more to get through it. But life, happens, changes go on, too rapidly for that; because you see in the world everything is happening all together, everywhere, at once. And meanwhile we, with our myopic little minds, are working it out step by step.

We are greatly assisted by the rapidity of the computer, but even so the computer is still looking at things in rows. As the magnetic tape goes through and is scanned by the computer, it's still all going along in a single track. And I suppose then our difficulty is that we have lamentably one-track minds, in an infinitely many-tracked universe. And we may have to come to the alarming conclusion that the universe is smarter than we are.

I've just come back from Los Angeles. I was down there to meet with a group of rather important people. People in the movie industry, scientists, and so on, who were considering calling a congress of the best minds in the world. To meet in Los Angeles, in the near future, to be a kind of planetary alarm conference.

They wanted scientists and statesmen, religious leaders, and to do something to impress upon the world, through all the media, that we are in very serious danger of destroying the biosphere – that is to say, the whole envelope of living creatures which covers this planet – through pollution, overpopulation, nuclear fallout, poisoning of our food, and very lack of food.

And we met to discuss the problem of organizing this conference. And here, there are all these brilliant people, and it came over us that we

really didn't know what we ought to say. And you can scream and create a state of panic, but that won't do any good. And when it came down to it, we didn't know what we ought to say because we really don't know what to do.

Some things that we might do, for example, to increase the food supply with high yield crops may be ecological mistakes.

And so the consensus of almost everybody at the meeting was, in some way or other, the human race has to learn how to leave the world alone. And let what is called the natural homeostasis – that is, the self balancing process of nature – take care of the mess.

Now how are we going to do that?

See our problem is we don't really know how to stop. We've got something started, and we see it's going in a wrong direction. And I think the difficulty is, to borrow an old Chinese saying, that when the wrong man uses the right means the right means work in the wrong way. In other words, there's something wrong with the way we think, and while that is there, everything we do will be a mess.

Now what is it that's wrong?

Now, as far as I can see, the basic mistake is that we've invented this wonderful system of language and calculation; and that it is at once too simple to deal with the complexity of the world, and also we are liable to confuse that system of symbols with the world itself.

Just as we confuse say money with wealth. A lot of people are in business to make money instead of wealth. When they make the money they don't know what to do with it.

And so in the same way we confuse happiness with status. And we confuse ourselves as living organisms, which are one with this whole universe, with something we call our personality.

Now what is our personality?

Our personality is what we call our image, our image of ourselves; and also our thought about ourselves, our idea of ourselves. This is the person.

In other words, what people meet and understand, and what I understand as Alan Watts, is a big act which is not really me. Because in the image of Alan Watts: There are not all my unconscious processes, both psychological and physical; the construction of my brain is not contained in the concept Alan Watts; and the concept Alan Watts does not contain the inseparable relationships which I have with all the rest of the universe. And therefore, that concept is a fraud. And when it's mistaken for the real me, there's a confusion; because if somebody says to

me, Alan Watts, 'do something about it', the concept Alan Watts can't do anything.

In other words, because it's only a concept, you can't make it lift a weight. Just as three is a concept, three the number, you can't make just plain three do anything. So also you can't wrap up parcels with the equator. It's a useful imaginary line, but it can't do anything.

But we all feel that this concept of ourselves, which we call our personality, or our ego, can do something because we think it really exists. And I'll tell you why we think it exists.

What happens if I were to say to you, "now look hard at the television screen, really, look at it". When you do, as distinct from just watching it in the ordinary way, when you say, 'now I've really got to see that', what do you do?: Notice that you tighten muscles all around [your neck]; that you frown a little; you'll clench your teeth perhaps. Now what's that got to do with seeing anything clearly? There's absolutely nothing to do with it. Same thing when you listen carefully. 'Now listen, catch everything that's said'. You start tightening up around your ears. That has nothing to do with hearing clearly.

Now from the moment we were little children, when teachers in class screamed at us, 'pay attention', we go tight in various ways: Either to see or hear more clearly, to concentrate; or to will something which is supposed to be difficult to do. And that constitutes a habitual tension over the whole body, that's there almost all the time. And that feeling of unnecessary tension is, as it were, the material sensation upon which we fasten this concept of 'I'. We hang it on to that feeling.

The concept is not us. The feeling of tension is completely phony. It has nothing to do with success in seeing hearing or acting. And so we get the marriage of an illusion with a falsehood. And that we call 'ourselves'. No wonder we feel cut off from everything, alienated, frightened of life and death.

So what has to happen is, we have to come back to a sane view of our own life which is the way we really are: An organism functioning in terms of the whole environment, with the whole environment; instead of this funny little separate personality. But how are we going to do that?

People say, 'you can't change human nature overnight'. You're asking us to give up the ego, and that's the most difficult of all things to do.

Actually it isn't, because the ego doesn't exist. But of course if you try to give up your ego with your ego, then it will take you to the end of time. Because this is the point: You can't transform yourself, you can't make yourself sane, you can't

make yourself loving, you can't make yourself unselfish, and yet, it's absolutely necessary that we be that way.

It's absolutely necessary if we are going to hand over the direction of nature to nature, which is what it comes to, it's absolutely necessary that we let go of ourselves, and it can't be done. Not by anything that we call, 'doing it', 'acting', 'willing', or even just accepting things.

You can't do it. Why? Because you don't really exist as that kind of a separate ego or personality. It's just an idea, based on a phony feeling.

So when it comes down to it, it's shocking news for us, for the human race, for our pride: You're only making a mess by trying to put things straight. They're trying to straighten out a wiggly world, and no wonder you're in trouble.

So you can't do anything. So you can't transform yourself. And what can you do? What happens then, if you actually realize you've come to a dead end?; and the human race has come to a dead end, in my opinion. What then? Commit suicide? Or is there something else?

What happens when you just wait?

There's nothing you can do. You watch. And all you see is what goes on that is happening of itself: You're breathing; the wind is blowing; the trees are waving; your blood is circulating; your nerves are tingling; It's all going on with itself.

But you know, that's you; that's the real you. The you that goes on of itself. It's not the symbol. It's not the person. It's you that's happening when you breathe. Yes, you can get the feeling that 'I am breathing' by shoving your breath. But your breath goes on, day in and day out, without your doing anything about it, or even thinking of it. The same way your brain is functioning without your forcing it.

So when you come to a dead end, and we are individually and socially, now, in 1971, at a dead end, this is the moment of which it is said man's extremity is God's opportunity; because we have to stop. And when we stop, we find a world that is happening rather than being done, being shoved; and that happening, as distinct from doing, is our fundamental self. And our fundamental self is not something just inside the skin. It's everything around us which we connect. When you look out of your eyes, at nature happening out there, you're looking at you.

I'm not going to say what we should do from then on. But simply, that before we think of doing anything in this critical situation, we realize the completely illusory nature of the beings that we think we are. And get back again to the beings that we really are. Which includes all this outside world, no longer left outside you.