

A Note on Alan Watts and the Martial Arts

PETER J. COLUMBUS*

Abstract

Alan Watts is widely known as an interpreter of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism for audiences in Europe and America. The present piece is a brief note on Watts' rhetorical style in "The Language of Metaphysical Experience: The Sense of Non-Sense" – a critical essay on logical philosophy first published in the *Journal of Religious Thought* in 1953. I contend that Watts applied a rhetorical strategy derived from the art of ju-jutsu in response to logical philosophy's dismissal of mystical language as tautology and nonsense. Watts yielded to the thrust of the logical argument, and then redirected the argumentative energy against logical philosophy itself, thereby neutralizing its critique of mysticism. My concluding remarks briefly discuss Watts' literary acumen, the cultural influences on his knowledgebase, and his martial arts rhetorical style vis-à-vis psychotherapy.

Zusammenfassung

Alan Watts ist weithin als Vermittler/Interpret des Buddhismus, des Taoismus und des Hinduismus für ein europäisches und us-amerikanisches Publikum bekannt. Der vorliegende Beitrag ist eine kurze Anmerkung zu Watts' rhetorischem Stil in "The Language of Metaphysical Experience: The Sense of Non-Sense" – einem kritischen Essay über die logische Philosophie, der erstmals 1953 im *Journal of Religious Thought* veröffentlicht wurde. Ich behaupte, dass Watts eine rhetorische Strategie anwandte, die sich aus der Kunst des Jiu-Jitsu ableitete, um damit eine Antwort auf die Ablehnung mystischer Sprache als Tautologie und Unsinn durch die Logikphilosophie zu geben. Watts gab dem Druck der logischen Argumentation nach und lenkte die argumentative Energie dann gegen die Logikphilosophie selbst um, wodurch er deren Kritik am Mystizismus neutralisierte. In meinen Schlussbemerkungen gehe ich kurz auf Watts' literarischen Scharfsinn, die kulturellen Einflüsse auf seine Wissensbasis und seinen von den Kampfkünsten geprägten rhetorischen Stil im Verhältnis zur Psychotherapie ein.

INTRODUCTION

THE invitation to contribute to this volume on martial arts and psychology was based on my research and writing activity from three-plus decades ago. In 1988, Don Rice and I compiled a set of papers from the extant English-language academic and popular literatures on the psychological, philosophical, and cultural aspects of martial arts participation. Titled *Psychology of the Martial Arts* (Rice & Columbus, 1988), this long-since out-of-print book was an attempt at understanding "Eastern martial arts as paths for self-discovery in the West" (Columbus, 1988, p. 2). To the best of our knowledge (or present memory), *Psychology of the Martial Arts* (Rice & Columbus, 1988) was

*Peter J. Columbus is a research psychologist, administrator of the Shantigar Foundation, and board member of Valley Zendo – a Soto Zen Buddhist temple in the Sawaki-Uchiyama lineage. Holding a PhD in experimental psychology (University of Tennessee) and MA in humanistic psychology (West Georgia College), he formerly taught neuroscience and human development courses at Assumption College. He is editor of six books on Alan Watts' life and work, including two forthcoming volumes: *Alan Watts' Nonsense: A Revised and Expanded Edition* (with Michael Heyman) from San Diego State University Press, and *Alan Watts: Selected Essays from a Christian-Buddhist Pilgrimage* from Orbis Books.

among the first (if not the first) scholarly collections of theoretical and empirical studies concerning mid/late-twentieth century martial arts and martial artists in North America. Perhaps the closest comparable texts in the literature at that time (though neither is too close nor too comparable) were *Mind and Body: East Meets West* (Kleinman, 1986) and *The Martial Spirit: An Introduction to the Origin, Philosophy, and Psychology of the Martial Arts* (Kauz, 1977). Overlook Press subsequently appropriated several papers contained in *Psychology of the Martial Arts* (Rice & Columbus, 1988) for inclusion in their volume titled *The Overlook Martial Arts Reader: An Anthology of Historical and Philosophical Writings* edited by Randy F. Nelson (1989). The publication of *Psychology of the Martial Arts* (Rice & Columbus, 1988) was co-extensive with a psychological study of martial arts participation that Rice and I were conducting from an existential-phenomenological viewpoint. The initial fruits of this investigation were presented to the 1989 meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA) in New Orleans (Columbus & Rice, 1989). The APA presentation was followed by a theoretical commentary on “Psychological Research in the Martial Arts” published in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* (Columbus & Rice, 1991), and a qualitative research report titled “Phenomenological meanings of Martial Arts Participation” published some years later in the *Journal of Sport Behavior* (Columbus & Rice, 1998).

My current research and writing activity is focused primarily on the life, work, and influence (historical and contemporary) of the mid-twentieth-century philosopher Alan W. Watts (1915-1973). Again collaborating with Don Rice, we edited an invited collection of original essays by eminent thinkers concerning Watts’ contributions to psychology, philosophy, and religion. The resulting text, *Alan Watts – Here and Now* (Columbus & Rice, 2012a), appeared in the Transpersonal and Humanistic Psychology series published by State University of New York Press (SUNY). In this volume was offered my essay on the “Phenomenological Exegeses of Alan Watts” (Columbus, 2012) which detailed Watts’ applications of phenomenological and hermeneutical strategies to problems of anxiety and identity. Rice and I then compiled and editorially curated a collection of 30 academic writings and lectures by Watts himself. Organized under six themes, including 1) language and mystical experience, 2) Buddhism and Zen, 3) Christianity, 4) comparative religion, 5) psychedelics, and 6) psychology and psychotherapy, *Alan Watts in the Academy* (Columbus & Rice, 2017b) was likewise published in the SUNY Press series in Transpersonal and Humanistic Psychology (earning Foreword Reviews’ Book of the Year in Philosophy). Contemporaneous with Columbus and Rice (2017b), I guest-edited two transdisciplinary symposia on Watts for *Self & Society* – the flagship international journal of the Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain (see Columbus, 2015, 2017). The two *Self & Society* symposia are now reallocated and combined with additional papers to form *The Relevance of Alan Watts in Contemporary Culture: Understanding Contributions and Controversies* (Columbus, 2021d), a volume in the Routledge Research in Psychology series. *The Relevance of Alan Watts* contains my retrospective review of Watts’ classic *Psychotherapy East and West* (Columbus 2021c), and my collaboration with Ellen F. Franklin focused on C. G. Jung’s formative influence on Watts (Franklin & Columbus, 2021).

The goal for the present essay is to marry my early emphases on psychology and martial arts participation with my recent focus on Alan Watts’ life and work. Reaching his lifetime peak of popularity in the 1960s California counterculture, Watts is widely known as an interpreter of certain religions of Asian origin – Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism – for mid-twentieth-century audiences in Europe and America. Watts was not a lifelong “martial artist” in the literal sense of the phrase, though he reports in his autobiography that his chief Buddhist mentor in 1930s England, Christmas Humphreys, “took me to the Japanese *budokwai* in London, where we practiced judo and kendo (fencing), as well as *ju-no-kata*, a slow-motion judo which demonstrates its fundamental principles” (Watts, 1973, p. 130). Watts admittedly “never became a true expert in these arts.” However, he wrote, “such practices taught me how to use my feet, how to dance, and above all, how to

generate energy by following the line of least resistance” (p. 130). Previously, I have noted various pedagogical strategies employed by Watts in certain of his writings (see Columbus, 2012, 2021c). In the present piece, I make brief note of a point concerning Alan Watts’ rhetorical style and the martial arts. I suggest that Watts followed a “line of least resistance” by applying two martial arts principles – initially discussed vis-à-vis ju-jutsu in *The Spirit of Zen* (Watts, 1936/1958) – as pedagogical strategies in his essay on “The Language of Metaphysical Experience: The Sense of Non-Sense” (Watts, 1953/2017a). “The Language of Metaphysical Experience” is a response to criticisms levied in “modern logical philosophy – scientific empiricism, logical positivism, and the like” (p. 67) – against the legitimacy of mystical experience as a philosophical subject matter. As shown below, Watts does not engage with logical philosophers in polemical argument concerning their own critical assessments of mysticism. Instead, he applies a martial arts strategy derived from ju-jutsu by 1) yielding to the argumentative thrust of logical philosophy’s point of view, and then 2) deftly redirecting the energetic strength of logical philosophy’s argument against itself.

Be aware that the following discussion is merely a bare-bones sketch and sampling of Watts’ (1953/2017a) thinking. My presentation in no way offers or claims to reflect the fully nuanced content of Watts’ writing. Be aware also that my discussion below will be limited to the issue mentioned above. For an early reflection on Watts vis-à-vis criticisms of his life and work, see Columbus (1985). For “A New Look at Alan Watts” including consideration of his overall contributions to 1960s psychology, philosophy, and religion, see Columbus and Rice (2012a, 2012b). Likewise, an examination of Watt’s place within scholarly discourse can be found in “Alan Watts and the Academic Enterpris” (Columbus & Rice, 2017a), and for analysis of Watts’ relevance regarding his contributions to contemporary culture and the attendant controversies surrounding his life and work, see Columbus (2021b, 2021d). Moreover, see Columbus (2021a) for a bibliographic resource listing works by and about Watts; see also Columbus and Rice (2017c) for a list of “Academic and Literary Reviews of Watts’ Major Texts.”

Thrusting, Yielding, Pacifying

My key point of note in this brief essay is that Alan Watts used martial arts concepts which he first described in *The Spirit of Zen* (Watts (1936/1958) in his subsequent essay on “The Language of Metaphysical Experience” (Watts (1953/2017a). *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work, and Art in the Far East* is Watts’ first book, appearing in his twenty-first year of life – 1936 – as a volume in publisher John Murray’s *Wisdom of the East* series edited by Launcelot Cranmer-Byng. Subsequent editions of the text were issued with minor revisions in 1954 and 1958, with several reissues of the third edition in various years thereafter. *The Spirit of Zen* (1936/1958) contains a foreword by the author, five brief chapters, and a short conclusion. The five chapters concern (1) “The Origins of Zen” in Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism (pp. 21-43); (2) “The Secret of Zen,” this is to say, the epistemological grounding of Zen’s teachings (pp. 46-64); (3) Koan practice and zazen as “The Technique of Zen” (pp. 65-81); (4) “Life in a Zen Community,” including the Sangha generally and monasticism in particular (pp. 83-97); and (5) “Zen and the Civilization of the Far East” (pp. 98-120). According to Watts (1936/1958) in chapter 5 (and echoing the view of D. T. Suzuki):

Zen has influenced the civilization of the Far East in two directions – in aesthetics and in the military arts. On the one hand it was Zen which produced the poetry and other-worldliness of the tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*), the art of landscape gardening, the work of the Sung, Sumiye, and Kano painters, the poetry of Basho and the quiet simplicity of Japanese architecture, while on the other it was Zen which produced the alarming technique of *ju-jutsu* and *kenjutsu*, and the stern principles of *Bushido* – the Samurai’s code of chivalry. (pp. 104-105)

Judging by Watts’ (1936/1958) bibliography, his main textual martial arts sources are, in addition

to various works of Suzuki, Harrison's (1913) *The Fighting Spirit of Japan* and Nukariya's (1913) *The Religion of the Samurai*. However, I am less interested in Watts' sources (and their possible epistemological or historical biases and inaccuracies) than in his own discussion concerning, in particular, ju-jutsu and its application in rhetorical form. According to Watts (1936/1958), "*Ju-jutsu* is a method of self-defense without weapons founded on the principle of defeating one's opponent by [1] yielding to him and [2] using his own strength" against him. (p. 115). Noting the origins of ju-jutsu methodology "in the philosophy of *wu-wei*", Watts cites a legend of its discovery through watching falling snow accumulating on tree branches: "On the branches of tough and rigid trees the snow piles up until they crack beneath its weight, while thin and springy branches simply yield and throw it to the ground without being broken or bent" (p. 115). Per yielding to an opponent, Watts writes:

The more force one uses in trying to defeat an expert in ju-jutsu, the more one is likely to be hurt. It is like barging heavily against a door with a weak latch; it simply flies open and throws one to the floor. In this way the exponent of ju-jutsu is like life itself; try to catch hold of him or to strike him down so that he has no more power over you, and he is no longer there. The more you struggle, and the harder you hit, the faster he slips away, for he is so poised that you actually push him away with your own strength. (p. 117)

As for using an opponent's strength against him, Watts notes:

In ju-jutsu the two combatants move as one man; attack and defense is one movement, and there is no straining, no resistance and no hesitation, until with a sudden thud one of the men seems to have been hurled to the ground with gigantic force. He has made a false step, and his opponent has thrown him off his balance so that he falls with the full force of his own weight, with perhaps just an extra push from behind to add speed to his defeat. (p. 118)

The ju-jutsu strategies of yielding to and redirecting an opponent's strength and energy are displayed in the rhetorical style of Alan Watts' (1953/2017a) essay on "The Language of Metaphysical Experience: The Sense of Non-Sense." The essay was first presented at the 13th Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion sponsored by The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City and held at Columbia University in 1952. Watts' paper was subsequently first published in Howard University's *Journal of Religious Thought* in 1953. Circa 1952-1953, Watts was professor of comparative philosophy at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, a position he maintained until 1957. Prior to that time, Watts had spent the 1940s decade in Episcopal seminary (1941-1944) and followed by his priestly ordination plus six years of chaplaincy at Northwestern University in Evanston Illinois, ultimately resigning from the church and university in 1950. Watts has been called an apophatic theologian and philosopher (see Keightley, 2012), that is to say, he was concerned with mystical experience – that which can be intimately intuited through transcending or letting go of conceptual or linguistic forms that possibly delimit one's greater (cosmic) sense of identity beyond individual ego (Watts, 1944/2017c, 1951/2017b). As Watts (1953/2017a) describes it in "The Language of Metaphysical Experience":

There is an area of human experience for which we do not have any really suitable name in our Western languages, for while it is basic to such matters as religion, metaphysics, and mysticism, it is not identical with any one of them. I refer to the perennial type of experience that is described as a more or less immediate knowledge of God, or of the ultimate reality, ground or essence of the universe, by whatever name it may be represented.

According to the ancient spiritual traditions of both Europe and Asia, which include ways of life and thought as widely different as Buddhism and Catholicism, this experience is the supreme fulfillment of human life – the goal, the final end, toward which human existence is ordered. (p.67)

The thrust of modern logical philosophy's criticisms of this "perennial type of experience" is that it is found to be lacking rational cogency. While acknowledging that mystical experiences may be subjectively fascinating and amusing, "logical philosophy finds it altogether illegitimate to regard them as containing any knowledge of a metaphysical character, as constituting an experience of 'ultimate reality' or the Absolute" (Watts, 1953/2017a, p. 67). Logical philosophy's criticism of mysticism is founded less on a psychological consideration of the issue as upon a solely logical assessment "of such universal concepts as God, Ultimate Reality, Absolute Being and the like – all of which are shown to be terms without meaning" (p. 67). It is beyond the scope of Watts' piece (and my piece, also) to fully elaborate the analytic steps toward logical philosophy's conclusion that mysticism is plainly insignificant save to note that in Western philosophy and religion there is a prevalent assumption that "religio-metaphysical statements are of the same order as scientific and historical statements. We have generally taken for granted that the proposition 'There is a God' is of the same kind as 'There are stars in the sky'" (p. 68). And therein lies the logical problem. For example:

In a theological system where God plays the part of a scientific hypothesis, that is, a means of explaining and predicting the course of events, it is easy enough to show that the hypothesis adds nothing to our knowledge. One does not explain what happens by saying that God wills it. For if everything that happens is by divine intention or permission, the will of God becomes merely another name for "everything that happens." Upon logical analysis, the statement, "Everything is the will of God," turns out to be the tautology, "Everything is everything." (p. 69)

The overall verdict, Watts observes, "seems to be that, under logical scrutiny, the entire body of metaphysical doctrine consists either of tautology or nonsense" (p. 69).

Watts (1953/2017a) points out that the intellectual grappling between modern logical philosophers on one hand, and metaphysicians and religionists on the other, has been theretofore mostly a polemical exercise. While the practitioners of logical philosophy have, on their side of the argument, worked toward devaluing and delegitimizing the insights contained in metaphysical and religious statements, aspiring guardians of religion and Faith, observes Watts, have in the main rummaged about rather ineffectually for ways and methods of thwarting logical philosophy at its own academic sport. "On the whole, the more successful counterattack has seemed to be returning one pooh-pooh for another; as, for instance, the quip that [logical philosophers] Ayer, Reichenbach, and company have exchanged philosophy for grammar" (p. 68). Alternatively, the point of departure for Watts' defense of metaphysics and religion, awkward as it may seem to many polemicists, is to yield to modern logical philosophy's argumentative thrust by deeming its fundamental contention about the hollow language of mystical experience as an exceedingly valuable offering to metaphysical deliberation – "enabling us to evaluate the true character and function of metaphysical terms and symbols far less confusedly than has hitherto been possible" (p. 68). The crucial role of logical philosophy within the realm of metaphysics and religion, Watts suggests, adds up to a complete demystifying of metaphysical thinking as it has been comprehended in the West – as involving meaningful assertions bearing positive information about "transcendental objects" i.e., God, the Absolute, etc. (p. 69). Thus, Watts adds:

The primary contribution of logical philosophy in this sphere is simply the confirmation of a point that has long been clear to both Hindus and Buddhists, though perhaps less widely realized in the Christian tradition. The point is that the attempt to talk about, think about, or know about the ultimate Reality constitutes an impossible task. (pp. 69-70)

Watts (1953/2017a) points out that Hindu and Buddhist philosophers, as well as certain mystics in Catholicism, understood that terms such as God, ultimate Reality, or essence of the universe

“meant not something but no-thing. They indicated a void in knowledge” (p. 74). Yet it is here that logical philosophy, like an assailant charging forcefully toward a door with a weak latch, pursues its criticism of mystical experience and metaphysics too far, beyond any sense of balance. Logical philosophy contends that the nonsense statements of negative metaphysics “do not constitute philosophy because they contribute nothing to knowledge – by which they mean that they do not assist us to predict anything, and offer no directions for human conduct” (p. 74). It is at this inflexion point where Watts re-directs the thrust of logical philosophy’s argument against itself. First, Watts notes, “philosophy – wisdom – consists as much in its spaces as in its lines, recognizing what is not and cannot be known as in the contrary” (p. 74). Second, Watts goes further by drawing on the “law of reversed effort” (p. 73), suggesting that the nonsense statements of negative metaphysics at least communicate the positive injunction to calm a surfeit determination to control what cannot be controlled and predict that which cannot be predicted. Third negative metaphysics “‘integrate’ logic and conscious thought with the indeterminate matrix, the non-sense, which we find at the root of all things” (p. 75). “Logical philosophy,” suggests Watts, “does not seem to have faced the fact that non-sense’ terms, so far from being valueless, are essential to every system of thought[...]. Logical philosophy itself by no means escapes from this limitation.”

For example, when logical philosophy asserts that “true meaning is a verifiable hypothesis” it must recognize that this very statement is meaningless if unverifiable. Similarly, when it insists that the only realities are those “facts” that are elicited in “scientific observation,” it must recognize that it cannot, and does not, answer the question “What is a fact?” If we say that “facts” or “things” are the segments of experience symbolized by nouns, we are merely shifting the irreducible element of non-sense in our definition from “fact” to “experience.” Some basic non-sense is entirely unavoidable, and the attempt to construct a completely self-defining system of thought is a vicious tautology. (p. 75)

CONCLUSION

MY goal in this brief essay was to offer a note concerning the rhetorical martial arts style of Alan Watts’ (1953/2017a) paper on “The Language of Metaphysical Experience: The Sense of Non-Sense.” Watts, I suggested, employed a ju-jitsu strategy by parrying the argumentative thrust of logical philosophy’s criticisms of mystical language by yielding to its charge, and then redirecting the force of argument against logical philosophy itself. In the light of the above note, I have three concluding remarks to offer for consideration. The first remark concerns the literary perspicacity of Alan Watts. In a previous writing, I have delineated Watts’ applications of phenomenological and hermeneutic strategies in his discussions of anxiety and identity respectively (see Columbus, 2012). Elsewhere I have mentioned Watts’ (1961) applications of Nagarjuna’s deconstructive method in *Psychotherapy East and West* (see Columbus, 2021c, p. 39). Watts’ (1953/2017a) rhetorical application of ju-jitsu in “The Language of Metaphysical Experience” is another example of the ingenious structuring of his illuminative writing style. Given Watts’ resourceful combinations of form and content, it is easy for me to concur with the assessment of David L. Smith: “As an authentic master of expository prose, Watts deserves and richly repays our attention” (as cited in Columbus, 2021b, p. xiv).

My second concluding remark concerns Watts’ (1953/2017a) suggestion that the nonsense statements of negative metaphysics at least communicate the positive injunction to calm a surfeit determination to control what cannot be controlled and predict that which cannot be predicted. His suggestion draws on what he calls “the law of reversed effort” (p. 73) – here meaning that too much effort channeled into ordering and predicting our circumstances leaves us ridden with anxiety, whereas relaxing these efforts to control our perceived disorder may calm us down. While

the earliest explicit use of this “law” by Watts seems to be in *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951), the “law” is implicit to Watts’ (1936/1958) description of ju-jutsu exponents as quoted above and here cited again:

The exponent of *ju-jutsu* is like life itself; try to catch hold of him or to strike him down so that he has no more power over you, and he is no longer there. The more you struggle, and the harder you hit, the faster he slips away, for he is so poised that you actually push him away with your own strength. (p. 117)

However, although Watts (1951) referred to the Taoist sage, Lao Tzu, as “that master of the law of reversed effort” (p. 10), thus intimating an Asian source for the idea, this “law” can be traced to the work of French psychologist Emile Coue (1857-1926), hence supporting the contentions of other scholars that Watts’ understanding and discussions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism were perhaps informed as much by European and American influences as they were by Asian sources (see, e.g., Payne, 2018).

My third and final concluding remark builds on Watts’ (1953/2017a) use of a martial arts rhetorical style – in this case described as a ju-jutsu strategy – to follow the path of least resistance toward arriving at “the indeterminate matrix, the non-sense, which we find at the root of all things” (p. 75) – and its implications for psychotherapy. Watts’ approach to the problem of logical philosophy is not unlike Heckler’s (1983/1988) description of a conflictual therapeutic encounter from an aikido point of view:

In the Japanese martial arts, there is a movement called *irimi*, which means entering into the place of conflict. If someone is attacking you, instead of trying to block it, run away from it, or be detached from it and pretend it isn’t happening, what you do is actually enter into that attack. And at the last minute, you turn so that you are not hit, but you are at the place of origin, standing next to the person [...]. *Irimi* is facing the conflict [...] with a sense of openness to it, being willing to see what is happening there [...] It is possible that inside the problem there is a solution. To take the energy of the attack and to redirect it is a way of neutralizing aggression. (p. 68)

Watts (1973) himself described this process as a kind of “spiritual judo” when remembering D. T. Suzuki’s lecture at the 1936 World Congress of Faiths:

Suzuki’s paper was a masterly argument to the effect that Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, was not a rejection or escape from life, but on the contrary, total acceptance of all its vicissitudes, and compassion for all sentient beings; a mastery of samsara – the world of birth-and-death – by a kind of spiritual judo. (pp. 140-141)

Finally, the sense of openness in the place of conflict was a key emphasis in Watts’ (1961) *Psychotherapy East and West* which Colin James Sander’s (2021) suggests was akin to Carl Roger’s person-centered approach while also anticipating the development of brief solution-focused approaches in family therapy plus Anderson and Goolishian’s (1992) not-knowing viewpoint within therapeutic types of encounter.

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