SOFTWARE & TECH

Alan Watts Does It Matter

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Introduction: The Question That Turns Everything Inside Out

There are certain questions that stop you in your tracks. Not because they are difficult to answer, but because they force you to examine the very ground upon which you are standing. "Does it matter?" is one such question. In the hands of a lesser thinker, it might be dismissed as a shrug of nihilism or a lazy surrender to indifference. But when the brilliant and irreverent philosopher Alan Watts posed this query, he was inviting us into a profound reconsideration of reality itself. The phrase "Alan Watts does it matter" has become a touchstone for those seeking a deeper, more playful understanding of existence. It is not a question about importance in the conventional sense, but a metaphysical exploration of whether the stuff of the universe—the physical world of rocks, stars, and bodies—is fundamentally real, or whether it is something else entirely.

Alan Watts was a master of making the complex feel intimate and the esoteric feel immediately relevant. He blended Eastern philosophy, Western mysticism, and a dose of good-natured mischief to challenge the foundational assumptions of modern life. His famous query, "Does it matter?" is a doorway into his entire worldview. To walk through that door is to question the rigid separation between the self and the world, the mind and the body, and the spiritual and the material. It is a question that dissolves anxiety, loosens the grip of ego, and invites a kind of joyous participation in the dance of life. In this article, we will explore the layers of meaning behind this iconic question, the philosophy of Alan Watts, and why his insights are more relevant today than ever before.

Who Was Alan Watts? The Philosopher of Play

Before we dive into the meaning of "Does it matter?", it is helpful to understand the man behind the question. Alan Watts was born in England in 1915 and later moved to the United States, where he became one of the most influential popularizers of Eastern philosophy in the West. He was not an academic in the traditional sense. He did not write dry, impenetrable tomes. Instead, he spoke and wrote with a clarity and warmth that made Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Vedanta feel accessible to anyone with a curious mind.

Watts was a prolific writer, a compelling speaker, and a man who lived his philosophy as much as he articulated it. He understood that the deepest truths are often best conveyed through paradox, humor, and story. His lectures, many of which are still widely available on platforms like YouTube, have a timeless quality. When you listen to Alan Watts, you do not feel like you are being lectured; you feel like you are being reminded of something you always knew but had forgotten. The question "Does it matter?" is quintessential Watts. It captures his ability to take a simple, everyday phrase and turn it into a tool for spiritual awakening.

The Meaning Behind "Does It Matter?"

At first glance, "Does it matter?" sounds like a question of value. Does this thing have significance? Is it important? But Alan Watts used the phrase in a much more literal and profound sense. He was asking: Does matter itself matter? In other words, is the physical universe—the world of atoms, molecules, and tangible objects—the ultimate reality? Or is there something more fundamental, something that we might call consciousness, spirit, or simply the void?

Watts was deeply influenced by Taoism and Zen Buddhism, both of which challenge the Western obsession with substance and solidity. In the Taoist view, reality is a seamless, flowing process. It is not a collection of separate things but a unified field of energy and transformation. The concept of "matter" as a solid, enduring substance is an abstraction, a convenient label we apply to a pattern of movement. Watts extended this logic to its most radical conclusion: if matter is not ultimately real, then the question "Does it matter?" becomes a liberating joke. The thing you are worried about, the problem that weighs on your mind, the identity you cling to—none of it is as solid as you think.

This is not nihilism. It is not a denial of the beauty or meaning of life. Quite the opposite. By recognizing that the material world is not the final word, we are freed to experience life more fully, more playfully, and with less fear. The question "Does it matter?" is an invitation to loosen our grip on the idea that things must be a certain way. It is a reminder that the universe is not a machine but a work of art, and we are not separate spectators but integral parts of the masterpiece.

The Illusion of the Separate Self

To fully appreciate Alan Watts' perspective on whether anything matters, we must grapple with his central insight: the illusion of the separate self. Most of us walk through life with the feeling that we are a "skin-encapsulated ego," a lone consciousness trapped inside a body, looking out at an external world. This feeling of separation is the source of much of our anxiety. We feel that we must protect ourselves, assert our identity, and struggle against a universe that seems indifferent or even hostile.

Watts argued that this feeling is a hallucination. It is a product of language and culture, not of direct experience. When you look closely at your own experience, can you find a sharp boundary between yourself and the world? Your body is constantly exchanging atoms with the environment. Your thoughts arise from a brain that is shaped by genetics, culture, and personal history. Your sense of "I" is a process, not a thing. It is like a whirlpool in a river: it has a shape and a pattern, but it is not separate from the water.

If the separate self is an illusion, then the question of what matters takes on a new dimension. What matters to whom? The ego that wants to be important, to accumulate possessions, to be right, to live forever—that ego is a phantom. Once you see through it, the urgency of its desires begins to fade. You realize that you are not a lonely fragment adrift in a meaningless universe. You are the universe itself, aware of itself, playing a temporary role as a human being. From this perspective, everything matters and nothing matters, simultaneously. Every moment is precious because it is the only moment there is. And yet, no moment can be clung to, because the flow is all there is.

Matter and Consciousness: Watts' Non-Dual Vision

One of the most refreshing aspects of Alan Watts' philosophy is his refusal to get caught in the trap of materialism versus spiritualism. He did not argue that matter is unreal and only spirit exists, nor did he argue that consciousness is merely a byproduct of physical processes. Instead, he espoused a non-dual vision in which the apparent separation between mind and matter is a product of faulty perception.

In Watts' view, consciousness and matter are two aspects of the same reality. The universe is not a collection of dead particles that somehow gave rise to life and mind. Rather, the universe is a living, conscious process from the start. Matter is not inert; it is a pattern of energy that is inherently aware. This is not a new idea. It echoes the panpsychism of ancient philosophy and the insights of many indigenous traditions. But Watts expressed it in a way that resonated with modern audiences who were tired of the sterile reductionism of scientific materialism.

When Alan Watts asks "Does it matter?", he is pointing to the fact that matter and mind are not separate substances. The question is a koan, a riddle that cannot be solved by logic alone. It must be felt. When you truly feel that the physical world is alive with intelligence, that your own consciousness is not a fluke but a manifestation of the cosmos, then the distinction between what matters and what does not becomes blurry. Everything is a meaningful expression of the whole. Even the most trivial event is a gesture of the universe.

Relevance to Modern Life: Anxiety, Burnout, and the Search for Meaning

Why do people still search for "Alan Watts does it matter" in the age of social media, climate anxiety, and economic instability? Because Watts offers a medicine that modernity desperately needs. We live in a culture that is obsessed with importance. We are told that everything we do must matter: our careers must be meaningful, our relationships must be fulfilling, our consumption must be ethical. This pressure creates a constant state of tension. We are afraid of wasting time, of making mistakes, of being insignificant.

Watts' perspective is a gentle antidote to this fever. When he asks "Does it matter?", he is not telling you to stop caring. He is telling you to care in a different way. Care with detachment. Care with playfulness. Care with the understanding that the game of life is not a test with a pass-or-fail grade but an improvisational performance. The stakes are high only if you believe the illusion of separation is real. Once you see that you are the entire universe in disguise, the fear of failure and the hunger for significance begin to dissolve.

This is not an escape from responsibility. It is the foundation for genuine responsibility. When you act from a place of non-dual awareness, you are no longer acting to feed a desperate ego. You are acting as a natural expression of the cosmos. Your choices become more intuitive, more compassionate, and more aligned with the flow of life. The question "Does it matter?" becomes a tool for cutting through mental clutter and returning to the present moment.

Watts' Playful Approach to Philosophy

One of the reasons Alan Watts remains so popular is his sense of humor. He did not deliver his insights with the stern gravity of a prophet. He delivered them with a twinkle in his eye and a cigarette in his hand. He laughed at the absurdity of taking oneself too seriously. The question "Does it matter?" is inherently funny. It is a kind of cosmic joke. You spend your whole life worrying about what matters, only to discover that the question itself is a trick.

Watts often used the analogy of the dream. In a dream, everything seems real. You are running from a monster, and your heart is pounding. But then you wake up, and you realize the monster was never there. The fear was real, but the object of the fear was not. Life, Watts suggested, is something like that. The problems we face are real within the context of the dream, but the dream is not the only reality. When we wake up to our true nature, the monster loses its power. We can still engage with life, but we do so with a lightness of being.

This playful approach is not a denial of suffering. Watts was not a naive optimist. He acknowledged that life includes pain, loss, and difficulty. But he argued that suffering is compounded by our resistance to reality. When we try to hold on to what is fleeting and push away what is unpleasant, we create a secondary layer of suffering. The question "Does it matter?" can help us release that resistance. It reminds us that even the worst moments are temporary patterns in the infinite dance.

Practical Applications: How to Use This Question in Daily Life

The philosophy of Alan Watts is not meant to be stored in a book. It is meant to be lived. So how can you use the question "Does it matter?" in your daily life? Here are a few ways to integrate Watts' wisdom into your routine:

- When you are stressed about a deadline: Pause and ask yourself, "In the grand scheme of the universe, does this deadline matter?" The answer may be no, but that does not mean you should ignore your work. It means you can approach it with less anxiety and more focus. The stress is the real problem, not the deadline.
- When you are caught in a conflict: Ask yourself whether being right matters more than being at peace. The ego wants to win arguments, but the self that transcends the ego knows that harmony is a higher value. "Does it matter who was wrong?" is a question that can defuse tension instantly.
- When you are planning for the future: Ask yourself whether your plans are based on fear or on genuine desire. Many of our goals are attempts to secure a sense of identity that we feel is fragile. Watts would encourage you to loosen your attachment to outcomes and enjoy the process.

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