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**A Comparative Study of  
Alan Watts and Robert Pirsig  
through the Lens of Zen Buddhism**

**By Brandon Mayfield  
August 2025**

**(P) The Robert Pirsig Association**

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**Introduction**

Alan Watts and Robert Pirsig, two influential 20th-century thinkers, each used Zen Buddhism as a lens to critique and reinterpret Western rationalism. Though neither were ordained Zen monks, both became conduits for Eastern philosophical ideas to reach a Western audience. Their works—Watts through lectures and books like *The Way of Zen* (1957), and Pirsig through his philosophical novels *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (ZMM, 1974) and *Lila* (1991)—reveal a shared interest in bridging the gap between subject and object, reason and intuition.

Ian Glendinning's March 2024 reflection (\*3) on Watts points to a 1960 interview—eight years before *ZMM* was conceived—where Watts explores Zen as psychotherapy and discusses the individual's engagement with tools, craft, and the art of living, echoing many of Pirsig's later themes. While Watts predates Pirsig in publication, and thematic overlap is evident, direct influence is harder to verify. It is equally certain that both were influenced by common sources, particularly Japanese natives D.T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki, and Dainin Katagiri, who were active in San Francisco and Minnesota—regions linked to both thinkers and to Pirsig's family.

However, it's important to note that Pirsig's engagement with Eastern philosophy began long before his books were published. His interest dates back to 1944–45, when he became dissatisfied with classical scientific hypotheses and dropped out of his chemistry degree. In 1946–47, he served in Korea and read F.S.C. Northrop's *The Meeting of East and West* (1946) on the troopship back. He earned a philosophy degree in 1950 and spent the following year studying Oriental philosophy at Benares Hindu University. Pirsig began conceptualizing his "great book" in 1954–55 while in Mexico, even though it wasn't until 1967–68 that the *ZMM* project emerged under its eventual title. According to Wendy Pirsig (\*4), he read and admired Watts during this period, and they clearly shared many intellectual influences.

This comparative study seeks to explore their backgrounds, the nature of their engagement with Zen Buddhism, and the intersections—and divergences—of their philosophical visions.

## Part I: Philosophical Context, Backgrounds, and Biographical Timelines

Alan Watts (1915–1973) was born in England and grew up fascinated by Asian art and culture, developing a strong interest in Buddhism at an early age. Educated in theology, he became an Episcopal priest before leaving the clergy to popularize Eastern philosophy. Watts relocated to the U.S., becoming a prominent figure in the San Francisco counterculture scene. He wrote over 25 books and captivated audiences with his lyrical voice and poetic metaphors. Despite his success, he struggled with alcoholism and passed away at 58.

Watts' writing style was evocative and literary, often explaining Eastern ideas through Western idioms. In *The Way of Zen*, he distinguishes between the prickly (analytical, rationalistic) and the gooey (mystical, intuitive), stating: "The prickly people are tough-minded, rigorous, and precise... Gooey people are mystical, intuitive, and romantic." This anticipates Pirsig's division of people into classical and romantic types in *ZMM*—those who view the world through analysis versus those who engage with it aesthetically.

Robert Pirsig (1928–2017), by contrast, was an American Midwesterner with a scientific and philosophical background, though his earliest pre-school education happened in England. A child prodigy, he entered university at age 15. His academic trajectory, however, was turbulent and led to mental health struggles and institutionalization. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is part travelogue, part philosophical treatise, drawing from his personal breakdown to build a system of thought centered on "Quality." Unlike Watts, who embraced ambiguity and poetic paradox, Pirsig sought clarity and metaphysical resolution. His second work, *Lila*, expands the Metaphysics of Quality (MOQ) into a full philosophical system.

Although Pirsig did not study under Zen teachers directly, his wife Nancy and son Chris were involved in Zen practice under Dainin Katagiri in Minnesota. The Pirsig family was also involved in the founding of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC) in 1972, with Bob serving as a board member in 1973. Early royalties from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* helped fund the effort to bring Katagiri to lead the center. Katagiri later conducted Chris's memorial after his tragic death outside the San Francisco Zen Center in 1979. These familial and institutional connections to formal Zen practice lend weight to the idea that Zen played a meaningful role in Pirsig's life and thought.

Pirsig's own relationship with Zen, though not rooted in formal training, was not entirely distant either. In a 2006 interview with *The Guardian*, he recounts an encounter with Allen Ginsberg, who challenged him on his Zen credentials. Pirsig responded by naming Katagiri Roshi (honorific title for a revered master) as his teacher—eliciting approval from Ginsberg. He noted that while he sat with Katagiri and felt deeply aligned with his teachings, his involvement remained supportive rather than devout: "I put a down payment on the Zen Centre in Minnesota with him. I still support those people but I don't attend." This anecdote supports the idea that Zen was not just a conceptual framework in Pirsig's thought—it was also a lived family and communal connection.

While Pirsig's connection to Zen was largely informal and filtered through personal and familial engagement, Alan Watts pursued a more structured path. An ordained Episcopal priest who later distanced himself from the church, Watts immersed himself in academic and spiritual studies of Eastern religions, including time spent with Zen teachers in Japan and San Francisco. His writings, especially *The Way of Zen*, synthesized scholarly insight with poetic accessibility, offering Western audiences a more systematic—if sometimes simplified—introduction to Zen doctrine and practice. Unlike Pirsig, who used Zen as a conceptual framework for metaphysical inquiry, Watts frequently emphasized the experiential and meditative aspects of Zen as a living tradition.

Both Watts and Pirsig addressed the alienation of the modern individual, but from differing angles. Watts encouraged letting go of ego and embracing the flow of life. Pirsig, grappling with the collapse of rational systems, sought to reframe how meaning is interpreted—rooting it in the direct, undefinable experience of Quality. As Glendinning notes (\*3), Pirsig's agenda was not Zen per se, but the deeper ontological problem of how value exists before categorization.

In sum, while Watts may have influenced Pirsig indirectly—via cultural atmosphere, shared philosophical motifs, or mutual engagement with Zen literature—it is perhaps more accurate to view both as parallel seekers drawing from a shared wellspring of Eastern thought filtered through the lens of post-war Western disillusionment.

## **Part II: Philosophical Parallels, Shared Motifs, and Zen Influence**

One of the most striking philosophical parallels between Alan Watts and Robert Pirsig is their common effort to critique the limitations of Western dualism—particularly the subject-object divide that separates observer from observed. Watts expressed this through the language of non-duality, often citing Taoist and Zen analogies to argue that “the knower and the known are one.” He wrote, “Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth,” suggesting that the division between self and other is an illusion fostered by language and culture.

Pirsig arrives at a similar insight but through a different philosophical path. His *Metaphysics of Quality* argues that reality is fundamentally composed not of subjects and objects, but of experience—what he terms “Dynamic Quality.” In *ZMM*, he writes, “The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a motorcycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain.” This quote directly challenges the artificial separation of the sacred and the mundane, a key insight shared with Watts' teachings.

Both men also sought to reclaim value and meaning in everyday experience. Watts would often say, “This is it,” to indicate that enlightenment is not found in escape from the world but in full engagement with it. Pirsig likewise emphasizes attentiveness and craftsmanship, urging that Quality is found not in abstract principles but in the hands-on process of life: “Peace of mind produces right values, right values produce right thoughts, right thoughts produce right actions.”

Another overlap lies in their embrace of paradox and critique of rigid categorization. Watts enjoyed dismantling binary logic: “You and I are all as much continuous with the physical universe as a wave is continuous with the ocean.” Pirsig, on the other hand, uses the tension between romantic and classical understanding to show how people become trapped by one-sided views. His characters in *ZMM* personify this split, showing how its reconciliation may open a deeper mode of seeing.

Zen Buddhism has two main schools that developed around the 13th century: *Sōtō Zen*, which emphasizes seated meditation (*zazen*) and gradual awakening through quiet mindfulness, and *Rinzai Zen* (of which D.T. Suzuki helped introduce to the Western world), known for using paradoxical riddles (*kōans*) and intense mental discipline to provoke sudden enlightenment (*satori*). Sōtō focuses on non-striving awareness, while Rinzai favors direct, often startling insight.

While Alan Watts was not formally trained in either tradition, his approach aligns more closely with Rinzai Zen, favoring sudden realization, paradox, and intuitive understanding over strict meditative discipline. His lectures popularized Zen as a way of perceiving reality rather than a formal religious practice—contrasting with teachers like Shunryu Suzuki and Dainin Katagiri, who represented the more disciplined Sōtō tradition, with which Pirsig was more loosely associated.

In terms of Zen, both thinkers diverged from strict orthodoxy. Watts treated Zen more as a poetic and therapeutic approach to life than as a rigorous monastic tradition. His emphasis on spontaneity, play, and liberation from fixed identity resonated with a generation disillusioned by post-war materialism. Pirsig, while more systematic and metaphysical, never pretended to be a Zen scholar. He acknowledged in *ZMM*: “It should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhism.” Yet Zen’s focus on direct experience and non-conceptual awareness are deeply embedded in his philosophical orientation.

*Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, was reported to be part of Pirsig’s personal book collection, and highly recommended according to Wendy Pirsig, suggesting at least familiarity. The book, published in 1970, emerged just before *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and reflects the same Zen-influenced intellectual backdrop that shaped Pirsig’s thought. Though he never cited Suzuki directly, Pirsig practiced with Dainin Katagiri—Suzuki’s close colleague—in Minnesota. Alan Watts, active in San Francisco like Shunryu Suzuki, also never mentioned him directly, though according to Suzuki’s student and biographer David Chadwick, Suzuki once remarked, “Alan Watts is a good friend, but he talks too much.” This implies some awareness, but no documented personal relationship. Watts favored a non-institutional, intuitive approach to Zen, in contrast to Suzuki’s disciplined Soto Zen focus, highlighting a philosophical divergence despite overlapping interests.

Given the prominence of Zen teachers like D.T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki, and Dainin Katagiri in the U.S. during the mid-20th century, it is evident that both Watts and Pirsig were influenced—directly and indirectly—by their teachings. Watts openly cited D.T. Suzuki and helped introduce his work to Western audiences. Katagiri, though less known, had a

profound impact on the development of Zen communities in the Midwest and served as a spiritual anchor for Pirsig's family. The influence of these figures provides a plausible explanation for the thematic convergence between Watts and Pirsig, even in the absence of direct citation or personal correspondence.

### **Part III: Zen and the Counterculture: Rejection, Romanticism, and Discipline**

Pirsig viewed the 1960s countercultural embrace of Zen as a confused, and often distorted, expression of Dynamic Quality. He wrote that "Zen was often thought to be a sort of innocent 'anything goes'... that would express your Buddha-nature," but emphasized that this was a shallow misreading. Japanese Zen, in contrast, was rooted in social discipline and formality. In contrast to the free-spirited Zen of the flower children—popularized by figures like Watts—Pirsig saw the risk of conflating biological quality (instinctual or rebellious behavior) with true Dynamic Quality, the moral and metaphysical vitality he believed Zen pointed toward.

For Pirsig, this misreading reflected a deeper cultural shift—what he called "the collapse of values" following the failure of both Victorian conformity and 20th-century intellectualism. While Watts embraced spontaneity and liberation as integral to Zen's critique of Western dualism, Pirsig's *Metaphysics of Quality* attempted to create a more grounded hierarchy, distinguishing between levels of value and protecting against what he saw as moral relativism disguised as freedom.

Both Alan Watts and Robert Pirsig approached morality through the lens of Zen, rejecting rigid Western moralism while resisting the pitfalls of pure moral relativism. For Watts, Zen pointed toward a spontaneous, intuitive ethics grounded in non-dual awareness—right action arises naturally when one sees through the illusion of separateness. Morality, in this view, is not imposed but flows from being attuned to the present moment and the interconnectedness of life.

Pirsig, while influenced by Zen, sought a more structured response to cultural chaos through his Metaphysical framework, which presents a hierarchy of evolving moral patterns—biological, social, intellectual—guided by Dynamic Quality. Both thinkers sympathized with the Hippie movement's critique of materialism and institutional authority, yet Pirsig critiqued its descent into confusion and anarchy. He viewed true moral progress not as rebellion, but as alignment with deeper patterns of quality. In this way, both Watts and Pirsig offered Zen-informed alternatives to moral relativism—rooted not in dogma, but in direct experience, unified awareness, and an evolving or present sense of what is good.

### **Part IV: Divergent Philosophical Aims and Legacy**

Despite their similarities, Watts and Pirsig ultimately aimed in different directions. Watts was an orator and philosopher of experience, guiding listeners to let go of fixed ideas and flow with the impermanence of reality. His goal was spiritual insight and personal liberation. Pirsig, however, was a metaphysical constructor, seeking to rebuild a moral and philosophical framework grounded in Quality as the basis of reality.

Watts often avoided systems and intellectual rigor, deliberately. “Trying to explain Zen is like trying to catch wind in a box,” he would say, emphasizing the limits of language. Pirsig took the opposite approach, building the *MOQ* with painstaking philosophical care, attempting to reconcile reason with intuition, science with value, and structure with freedom. He wanted to fix what was broken in modern rationalism.

As such, Pirsig’s impact has been particularly strong among engineers, technologists, and those looking for a bridge between the technical and the spiritual. Watts’ impact has been more diffuse, reaching artists, seekers, and countercultural movements looking for spiritual renewal.

## **Conclusion**

Both Alan Watts and Robert Pirsig served as cultural translators of Eastern wisdom into Western contexts, drawing on Zen Buddhism to critique modern alienation. While their approaches, temperaments, and aims diverged significantly—Watts with playful spontaneity and Pirsig with structured inquiry—they shared a deep dissatisfaction with Western modes of thinking that separated mind from body, subject from object, and science from value.

Although the precise extent of influence is difficult to trace Pirsig was clearly familiar with Watts and his writings and both were shaped in part by the same cultural currents and spiritual figures—especially D.T. Suzuki and Katagiri Roshi. Their legacies remind us that profound insight can come from both poetic intuition and methodical exploration. Watts invited us to dance with the mystery of existence; Pirsig tried to chart its hidden structure. Together, they offered two lenses on the same question: how to live meaningfully in a world divided by reason and yearning for unity.

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## References and Acknowledgements

(\*1) Brandon Mayfield is an author and a member of the Robert Pirsig Association. <https://www.robertpirsig.org/testimonials/#BrandonMayfield> His writings include:

**Grains of Destiny: Return to Victory Road**

by Brandon Mayfield (3 Oct 2024)

**Atheism Versus Belief: Arguments For and Against Religion**

by Brandon Mayfield (4 Nov 2023)

**Improbable Cause: The War On Terror's Assault on the Bill of Rights**

by Sharia Mayfield and Brandon Mayfield (20 Aug 2015)

(\*2) The Robert Pirsig Association (RPA) is a volunteer self-funded association which supports the promotion of, and engagement in, the life, literary and philosophical works of Robert M Pirsig. <https://www.robertpirsig.org/>

(\*3) Ian Glendinning is an engineer, blogger and systems-thinking researcher whose work has been influenced by Pirsig. His short 2024 post on Alan Watts noted the timeline relationship between the two thinkers and initiated curiosity about how their work might be related. <https://www.psybertron.org/archives/18480>

(\*4) Wendy Pirsig is Robert Pirsig's widow and archivist. She met Bob after ZMM was published but was able to confirm in private correspondence that he had read Watts before, during his own research and writing and had a copy of "*The Way of Zen*" with him. Indeed, he used Watts' book to introduce Wendy to Zazen practice. For more on Wendy's Zen experiences see Wendy Pirsig – A Life in Zen. <https://www.robertpirsig.org/wendy-pirsig-a-life-in-zen/>

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