

Why James Allen Still Matters

By Mitch Horowitz



James Allen’s literary career was short, ranging roughly from the publication of his first book in 1901 to his death in 1912. Yet these few years of output resulted in nearly twenty books, including one of the most widely read inspirational works of our time: *As a Man Thinketh*.

Allen’s book became read in households where few or no other New Thought books were found. His methods of mental creativity and ethical self-seeking set the template for much of the metaphysical culture in America in the

twentieth century. In a sense, the key to understanding Allen’s work appears in the details of his own life. The writer’s journey from “poverty to power,” to use his phrase, was Allen’s greatest creation.

James Allen was born in 1864 in Leicester, an industrial town in central England. His father, William, was a successful knitting manufacturer who cultivated James’s taste in books and philosophy. A downturn in the textile trade drove William out of business, and in 1879 he traveled to New York City to look for new work. His plan was to get

settled and pay for the rest of the family to join him. But the unthinkable occurred. On the brink of the Christmas season, just after James had turned 15, word came back to the Allen household that its patriarch was dead. William had been found robbed and murdered two days after reaching New York. His battered body, with pockets emptied, lay in a city hospital.

James's mother, Martha, a woman who could not read or write, found herself in charge of James and his two younger brothers, with no means of support. "Young Jim" would have to leave school and find work as a factory knitter. The teenager had been his father's favorite. An avid reader, James had spent hours questioning him about life, death, religion, politics, and Shakespeare. "My boy," William told him, "I'll make a scholar of you." Those hopes were gone.

James took up employment locally as a framework knitter, a job that occupied his energies for the next nine years. He sometimes worked fifteen-hour days. But even amid the strains of factory life, he retained the refined, studious bearing that his father had cultivated. When his workmates went out drinking, or caught up on sleep, Allen studied and read two to three hours a day. Coworkers called him "the Saint" and "the Parson."

Allen read through his father's collected works of Shakespeare, as well as books of ethics and religion. He grew determined to discover the "central purpose" of life. At age twenty-four he found the book that finally seemed to reveal it to him: *The Light of Asia*, by Edwin Arnold. The epic poem introduced Allen, along with a generation of Victorians, to the ideas of Buddhism. Under its influence, Allen came to believe that the true aim of all religion was self-development and inner refinement.

Shortly after discovering *The Light of Asia*, Allen experienced a turning point in his outer life, as well. Around 1889 he found new employment in London as a private secretary and stationer—markedly friendlier vocations to the bookish man than factory work. In London he met his wife and intellectual partner, Lily.

By the mid-1890s Allen had deepened his inquiry into spiritual philosophies, immersing himself in the works of John Milton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and early translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Tao Te Ching*, and the sayings of Buddha. He marveled over the commonalities in the world's religions. "The man who says, 'My religion is true, and my neighbor's is false,' has not yet discovered the truth in his own religion," he wrote, "for when a man has done that, he will see the Truth in all religions."

Allen also grew interested in the ideas of America's New Thought culture through the work of Ralph Waldo Trine, Orison Swett Marden, and, later, Christian D. Larson. His reading of New Thought literature sharpened his spiritual outlook—in particular his idea that our thoughts are causative and determine our destiny.

By 1898, Allen found an outlet for his intellectual interests. He began writing for the *Herald of the Golden Age*. In addition to metaphysical topics, the journal was an early voice for vegetarianism and humane treatment of animals, ideas that Allen had discovered in Buddhism. In 1901, he published his first book of practical philosophy, *From Poverty to Power*. The work extolled the creative agencies of the mind, placing equal emphasis on Christian ethics and New Thought metaphysics. The following year, Allen launched his own mystical magazine, the *Light of Reason*, and soon came another book, *All These Things Added*.

It was a period of tremendous productivity, capped in 1903 by Allen's third and most influential work—the short, immensely powerful meditation, *As a Man Thinketh*. The title was loosely adapted from a caution against hypocrisy in Proverbs 23:7: “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” In Allen's eyes, that brief statement laid out his core philosophy—that a man's thought, if not the cause of his circumstances, is the cause of *himself*, and shapes the tenor of his life.

As the book's popularity rose, the phrase “as a man thinketh” became the informal motto of the New Thought movement, adopted and repeated by motivational writers throughout the century. Allen's book was marked by memorable, aphoristic lessons, which have withstood the passage of time. *As a Man Thinketh* defined achievement in deeply personal terms: “You will become as small as your controlling desire; as great as your dominant aspiration.” Toward the end of *As a Man Thinketh*, Allen wrote in a manner that amounted to autobiography:

Here is a youth hard pressed by poverty and labor; confined long hours in an unhealthy workshop; unschooled, and lacking all the arts of refinement. But he dreams of better things: he thinks of intelligence, of refinement, of grace and beauty. He conceives of, mentally builds up, an ideal condition of life; vision of a wider liberty and a larger scope takes possession of him; unrest urges him to action, and he utilizes all his spare time and means, small though they are, to the development of his latent powers and resources. Very soon so altered has his mind become that the workshop can no longer hold him.

As a personal rule, Allen used his life experiences as the backbone of his teaching. “He never wrote *theories*,” Lily noted in 1913, “or for the sake of writing; but

he wrote when he had a message, and it became a message *only when he had lived it out in his own life*, and knew that it was good.”

The impact of *As a Man Thinketh* was not fully felt during Allen’s lifetime, but the book brought him enough of an audience (and sufficient pay) so that he was able to quit secretarial work and commit himself to writing and editing full-time. On its publication, Allen, Lily, and their daughter Nora moved to the southern English coastal town of Ilfracombe, where he spent the remainder of his life. He wrote books at a remarkable pace, often more than one a year, producing nineteen works. Allen’s days assumed a meticulous routine of meditating, writing, walking in nature, and gardening. His work habits never flagged. “Thoroughness is genius,” he wrote in 1904.

For all of his creative output, Allen struggled with fragile health. Lily wrote of her husband faltering from an illness in late 1911. On January 24, 1912, Allen died at home in Ilfracombe at age 47, probably of tuberculosis. In an obituary of January 27, the *Ilfracombe Chronicle* noted: “Mr. Allen’s books...are perhaps better known abroad, especially in America, than in England.”

Indeed, the twentieth century’s leading American writers of motivational thought—from Napoleon Hill to Norman Vincent Peale—read and noted the influence of *As a Man Thinketh*. Dale Carnegie said the book had “a lasting and profound effect on my life.” The cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bob Smith, called it a favorite. The black-nationalist pioneer Marcus Garvey embraced the book’s do-for-self ethic and adapted the slogan “As Man Thinks So Is He” on the cover of his newspaper, *Blackman*. In years ahead, the book’s influence showed up in myriad places: An adolescent Michael Jackson told a friend that it was his “favorite book in the world;” NFL Hall of Famer

Curtis Martin credited *As a Man Thinketh* with helping him overcome pain and injury; businessman and Oprah Winfrey partner Stedman Graham said Allen’s work helped him attain “real freedom.”

Yet the full impact of *As a Man Thinketh* can best be seen in the successive generations of everyday readers who embraced its aphoristic lessons in directing one’s thoughts to higher aims, and to understanding success as the outer manifestation of inner development.

“Men do not attract that which they *want*,” Allen told readers, “but that which they *are*.” In that sense, Allen attracted a vast following of people who mirrored the ordinary circumstances from which he arose—and whose hopes for a better, nobler existence were reflected back to them in the example of his life.

A widely known voice of esoteric ideas, [Mitch Horowitz](#) is the PEN Award-winning author of books including [Occult America](#) and [One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life](#). He appears in the movie *As A Man Thinketh*. Visit him [@MitchHorowitz](#).

