

Zen and the Art of Photography

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Driven by a passion for photography and a fascination with the Zen Buddhist philosophy, the author conceptually and experientially examines the relationship between Zen Buddhism and the art of photography. Among the subjects discussed: What is the relationship between haiku and photography? What is the relationship between the mind of the photographer while creating a photograph and the Zen concept of the Empty Mind? What role does intuition and feeling play in photography? In Zen? Through examination of these concepts and relationships, the author explains the heightened awareness, joy, and enlightenment he has experienced through photography and suggests ways that others may share in the creative process.

Introduction

Photography is my passion. I feel that I am most alive, most aware of life when I am looking for images and capturing them. It is a time when I am most focused and most open to the world around me. It is also a time of great pleasure and satisfaction.

I think it was during my college years when I first became aware of Zen Buddhism. The idea of liberating myself from the narrow perspective of daily, compartmentalized life was attractive. The idea that life was *now* had never occurred to me. It was something I was saving for later. I remember a parable that crystallized the essence of Zen for me in those first years of discovery.

Buddha told a parable in a sutra:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted! (Reps & Sensaki, 1994, pp. 39-40).

This is the philosophy for me, I thought. Little did I realize the degree of enlightenment required to reach this state! In fact, I was never consciously able to reach it. In spite of all the reading I did and the all the vows that I made, the enjoyment of that strawberry eluded me. And then, as I got deeper into photography, I began to experience glimpses of what Zen was about. One day it suddenly occurred to me that I had already experienced it— unconsciously as a photographer! It was through the art of photography that I had plucked the strawberry and tasted its sweetness in a sustained and repeatable way. And without even trying.

What is Zen?

“Zen discipline consists in attaining enlightenment (or *satori*, in Japanese)...*Satori* finds a meaning hitherto hidden in our daily concrete particular experiences...The meaning thus revealed is in being itself, in becoming itself, in living itself...in the ‘isness’ of a thing.” (Suzuki, 1959, p.16).

Haiku and Photography

Dr. R.H. Blyth defined the *haiku*, which consists of seventeen syllables, as “the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things” (Suzuki, 1959, p.228). D.T.Suzuki feels it is “a significant intuition into Reality.” (Ibid). Perhaps the most famous *haiku* of all is that of Basho (Blyth, 1942, p. 217):

The old pond.

A frog jumps in—

Plop!

To D.T.Suzuki, “the spirit of Basho is the spirit of Zen expressing itself in the seventeen syllables.” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 383). Through his intuition or feeling, Basho saw the thing itself, its “isness”, its “suchness”, its “spiritual rhythm”, Reality. Basho experienced *satori*.

Photographer Edward Weston created silver halide *haikus*: “To see the *Thing Itself* is essential: the Quintessence revealed direct...” (Newhall, 1975, p. 41). Like Basho, Weston sought to experience the “spiritual rhythm” of life.

“Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole...The creative force in man recognizes and records these rhythms with the medium most suitable to him, to the object, or the moment, feeling the cause, the life within the outer form. Recording unfelt facts by acquired rule, results in sterile inventory.”(Newhall,1975, p.34).

French writer, philosopher, and semiologist Roland Barthes recognized the linkage between haiku and photography. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes undertook to define the essence of photography. He found that photographs that “animated” him and that he in turn “animated” consisted of two co-present elements: *Studium* and *Punctum*. According to Barthes, *Studium* “is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture” (Barthes, 1981, p.25). It is by *Studium* that one takes a kind of human interest in many photos that refer to a classical body of cultural information, photos that educate, signify, represent, inform, and reveal the photographer’s intentions. The second element, *Punctum*, “will break (or punctuate) the *Studium* “ (Barthes,1981, p. 26). *Punctum* rises out of the scene, seeks out the viewer, disturbs the *Studium*, wounds, pricks and stings the viewer. It is very often a detail.

According to Barthes, *Punctum* has the power to expand, to provoke a *satori*:

“A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer ‘anything whatever.’ This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void... This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku”. (Barthes, 1981, p.49).

“The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: ‘Technique,’ ‘Reality,’ ‘Reportage,’ ‘Art,’ etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness.” (Barthes, 1981 p.55).

Whether it is a silver halide or a digital image, the photograph can record and provoke enlightenment or *satori*. The photographer and the poet are tapping into the same source. When a photographer can “hear the light”, when his or her photograph “sings”, the spirit of Zen is present. I experienced the same feelings as Basho one summer in southern France when I wrote the following two *haikus*:

A summer mistral:

Sun and shadows dance;

A door slams; the cat hisses.

Summer Ivy wall:

Hum of the universe,

Golden rain on a roof.

Photography and The Creative Mind

When I first read photographer Minor White’s thoughts about photographic creativity, I realized that they applied to my own photographic experiences. I recognized the experiential truth behind his words.

“The state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank. I might add that this condition exists only at special times, namely when looking for pictures...For those who would equate ‘blank’ with a kind of static emptiness, I must explain that this is a special kind of blank. It is a very active state of mind really, a very receptive state of mind, ready at an instant to grasp an image, yet with no image pre-formed in it at any time. We should note that the lack of a pre-formed pattern or preconceived idea of how anything ought to look is essential to this blank condition. Such a state of mind is not unlike a sheet of film itself-seemingly inert, yet so sensitive that a fraction of a second’s exposure conceives a life in it. (Not just life, but a life.)

Possibly the creative work of the photographer consists in part of putting himself into this state of mind...The feeling is akin to the mystic and to ecstasy; why deny it? One feels, one sees on the ground glass into a world beyond surfaces. The square of the glass becomes like the words of a prayer or a poem, like fingers or rockets into two infinities-one into the subconscious and the other into the visual-tactile universe.” (Lyons, 1966, pp. 165-166).

French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in explaining his philosophy of photography quotes Cezanne: “When I paint and start thinking at the same time, everything’s lost.” (Berger, 1995, p. 15).

This idea of the blank, receptive, open, active, and sensitized mind of the photographer “when looking for pictures” accorded well with my own experience. And as I looked further, I found more support for Minor White’s ideas. For example, Edward Weston: “I start with no preconceived idea-discovery excites me to focus-then rediscovery through the lens...”(Newhall, 1975, p. 41).

And, Ansel Adams:

"I usually have an immediate recognition of the potential image, and I have found that too much concern about matters such as conventional composition may take the edge off the first inclusive reaction. Recognition and visualization are often blended in a single moment of awareness." (Adams, 1983, p.125.) Wasn't this what Vincent Van Gogh was talking about in his letter to his brother Theo:

"These colors give me extraordinary exaltation. I have no thought of fatigue; I shall do another picture this very night, and I shall bring it off. I have a terrible lucidity at moments when nature is so beautiful; I am not conscious of myself any more, and the pictures come to me as in a dream. I can only let myself go these days that are free from wind, especially as I think the work is getting rather better than the last sent you." (Stone, 1937, p. 391.).

Zen and The Empty Mind

All of these ideas about the nature of photographic creativity and the state of mind of the photographer when looking for images brought me back to Zen and the Zen concept of the Empty Mind, the idea that we must "awaken the mind without fixing it anywhere." (Blyth, 1942, p.27).

The Zen doctrine of *mushin* or "no-mind-ness" is embodied in the teaching of swordsmanship. Takuan Soho, in his essays addressed to the samurai swordsman, addressed the state of mind of the samurai in action:

"The No-Mind is the same as the Right Mind...The No-Mind is placed nowhere. Yet it is not like wood or stone. Where there is no stopping place, it is called No-Mind. When it stops, there is something in the mind. When there is nothing in the mind, it is called the mind of No-Mind. It is also called No-Mind-No-Thought." (Soho, 1986, p.33)

"If there is some thought within the mind, though you listen to the words spoken by another, you will not really be able to hear him. This is because your mind has stopped with your own thoughts...If you are able to remove this thing that is there, your mind will become No-Mind, it will function when needed, and it will be appropriate to its use." (Soho, 1986, p.34).

Professor Eugen Herrigel, in his classic book Zen in the Art of Archery, explained the connection between archery and the empty mind:

"This state, in which nothing definite is thought, planned, striven for, desired or expected, which aims in no particular direction and yet knows itself capable alike of the possible and the impossible, so unswerving is its power—this state, which is at bottom purposeless and egoless, was called by the Master truly 'spiritual.' It is in fact charged with spiritual awareness and is therefore also called 'right presence of mind.' This means that the mind or spirit is present everywhere, because it is nowhere attached to any particular place. And it can remain present because, even when related to this or that object, it does not cling to it by reflection and thus lose its original mobility. Like water filling a pond, which is always ready to flow off again, it can work its inexhaustible power because it is free, and be open

to everything because it is empty. This state is essentially a primordial state, and its symbol, the empty circle, is not empty of meaning for him who stands within it." (Herrigel, 1953, pp.37-38)

The Role of Intuition and Feeling in Photography

At this point, having established in my mind a basic connection between Zen and the art of photography, I began to look for more shared concepts. I wanted to understand why I released the shutter at one particular moment rather than another, and I wondered whether this could also be explained by Zen.

I have always believed in the power of intuition or feeling in photography. I have always urged my students to release the camera's shutter when it felt right, to let themselves be guided by their feelings. And I have found strong agreement among them on this point. Photographer Ansel Adams was of the same mind:

"I always encourage students to photograph everything they see and respond to emotionally. Intellectual and critical pre-evaluation of work is not helpful to creativity; regimenting perception into functional requirements is likewise restrictive. I have made thousands of photographs of the natural scene, but only those visualizations that were most intensely felt at the moment of exposure have survived the inevitable winnowing of time." (Adams, 1983, p.106.)

Similarly, Edward Weston, in discussing his classic photograph of a bell pepper and his concept of "significant presentation", spoke of "the presentation through one's intuitive self, seeing 'through one's eyes, not with them'; the visionary." (Newhall, 1975, p.34.)

French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson felt that photographic composition must be one of our constant concerns but that "at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition..." (Lyons, 1966, p. 47).

Philosophy professor, Susanne K. Langer, in her book *Problems of Art*, concurred: "I do believe, with many aestheticians and most artists, that artistic perception is intuitive, a matter of direct insight and not a product of discursive thinking..." (Langer, 1957, p. 61.)

Professor Curt John Ducasse, a philosopher whose work I always share with my students, was able to link the concepts of the blank/empty mind and artistic intuition. This linkage answers the question I posed earlier: when should one release the shutter in photography? Ducasse spoke of the aesthetic attitude and of aesthetic contemplation. For example, when looking at Van Gogh's *Irises*, or listening to the voice of Pavarotti, or trying to find photographic images, he believed that one should throw oneself open

"to the advent of *feeling*. What takes place is something analogous to listening. That is, the attention is withdrawn from everything other than the object of aesthetic contemplation, and inwardly the ground is cleared for the reception of the import of feeling of that object. This clearing of the ground means the elimination, as complete as possible, of any antecedent feeling. Aesthetic contemplation may thus be described as '*listening*,' or '*looking*,' with our *capacity for feeling*." (Ducasse, 1966, p. 140.)

"In proportion to the blankness and intentness of such '*listening*,' we gather from the object contemplated its import of aesthetic feeling if that import lies at all

within the range of our emotional capacities. This constitutes the aesthetic experience.” (Ducasse, 1966, p. 174.)

In other words, when looking for photographs, empty your mind, throw yourself open to the advent of feeling, and let yourself be guided by those feelings. Release the shutter when the image feels right, when the image “sings”, when you can “hear the light.” In my experience, “hearing the light” is a phenomenon which occurs on an intuitive level when I can feel that the photographic image is right, that the moment has come to record it. For example, if I am working in the studio with electronic flash, I will continuously adjust and readjust my modeling lights and check the effects on the subject through the ground glass of the camera. Invariably, a moment will arrive when everything feels right. And then, when I make that final polaroid test exposure, the developed image will “sing”. I will “hear the light” and will then proceed to record the image on film.

The Role of Intuition and Feeling in Zen

Do not kill the fly:

See how it wrings its hands;

See how it wrings its feet!

Issa (Blyth, 1942, p. 409.)

Next, I turned to Zen literature to see what role, if any, was played by intuition or feeling. D.T.Suzuki provided an answer to my question:

“The artist’s world is one of free creation, and this can come only from intuitions directly and im-mediately rising from the isness of things, unhampered by senses and intellect.” (Suzuki, 1959, p.17).

“The idea that the ultimate truth of life and of things generally is to be intuitively and not conceptually grasped... is what the Zen form of Buddhism has contributed to the cultivation of artistic appreciation among the Japanese people.” (Suzuki, 1959, p. 219).

“Intuition has various shades of meaning...Recently, however, I have come to think that ‘feeling’ is a better term than ‘intuition’ for the experience Zen claims to have-‘feeling’ in its deepest, broadest, and most basic sense... (Suzuki, 1959, Footnote, p. 219).

Conclusion

“Without *satori* there is no Zen. Zen and *satori* are synonymous.”

(Suzuki, 1959, p. 218.)

At the beginning of this inquiry, I sought to understand the state of awareness, involvement and satisfaction I felt through the art of photography—the sense that life was here and now and I was one with it, the feelings of discovery, joy, and enlightenment. After having examined the nature of Zen and photography, I believe that I have experienced *satori*

through the art of photography and that others may do so as well. Of course, there are many roads to *satori*. I found it and externalized it through photography, Herrigel through archery, Basho through *haiku*. Each of us participated in the creative process, in the creative experience. As a teacher I have shared my creative experiences and my passion for photography with my students in the belief that photography offered them a way to improve their awareness of the world, the quality of their lives, their ability to get more out of life—and, at its best, to allow them to experience *satori*. I believe that I was on the right path.

Yet, as a teacher, I knew I had to find a way to help my students experience the creative process, to help them experience *satori*. I had to find a way to put into action, to operationalize, the relationships and concepts I have covered in this article. I believe I found one part of the answer in the philosophy of Dr. Martin Buber.

In his book, *I and Thou*, Dr. Buber divides the world into two attitudes or orientations: I-You and I-It (or, I-He / I-She):

“The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.” (Buber, 1970, page 56.)

To Buber, the world of experience is the domain of science—impersonal, indirect and remote. The world of relation is unmediated, direct, and nonconceptual. He relates an experience he had one dim morning when he picked up a tiny piece of mica lying on the road. The light reflected from this inanimate object drew him into an I-Thou relationship with the mica. For a moment he tasted unity, forgot subject-object divisions, and “raised the piece of mica into the realm of that which has being” (Buber, 1970, footnote, p.146).

Similarly, in my photographic experience, I have found that if I approach both the animate and the inanimate worlds with the I-Thou attitude together with a blank, empty but sensitized mind; that if, further, I open myself to the advent of feeling and “look” with my capacity to feel; and that, lastly, if I trust those feelings or intuitions, I will experience *satori*. As one part of this operational process, the I-Thou attitude can help to open the world to us and allow us to see, in the words of photographer Edward Weston, that “clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smokestacks are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is life.” (Newhall, 1975, page 41.)

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