

The Art of
Zen Photography

Livio Fent

Metro Continuing Education

What Is Zen Photography?

Progressive Learnings

1. The application of Zen aesthetic techniques in photographic composition.
2. The application of being 'mindful' or of 'mindfulness' in the process of photographing.
3. The experience of being an 'observer' of the self in the act of photographing (no-self) ie photographic meditation.
4. Using photography as a meditative vehicle for achieving 'Satori' or 'Nirvana', which is the ultimate goal of a Zen practice.

Level of
abstraction

Lower



Higher

Course outline

- Zen origins: From yoga->Buddhism->Tao->Zen
- Zen and the photographic masters
- Zen/Tao aesthetic principles and photography
- Mindfulness in photography
- Photographic dharma and impermanence
- The concept of 'no-self' from a photographic perspective
- Practice

<http://www.liviofentphotoscience.com/Research.html>

What is Zen?

Progressive levels of Zen Awareness

Meditation



Quieting the activity of the Mind



Observing the conscious self



The Observer is pure Awareness
(no-mind, no-self, the impermanent present moment)



Historical beginnings

- Zen is an evolution of more ancient philosophies that can be traced back some 7000 years to archeological finds of the Indus Valley civilization.
- Seals from that era show an individual in a meditative lotus pose; an early yoga practice which in turn likely became the basis of a number of eastern religious practices such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

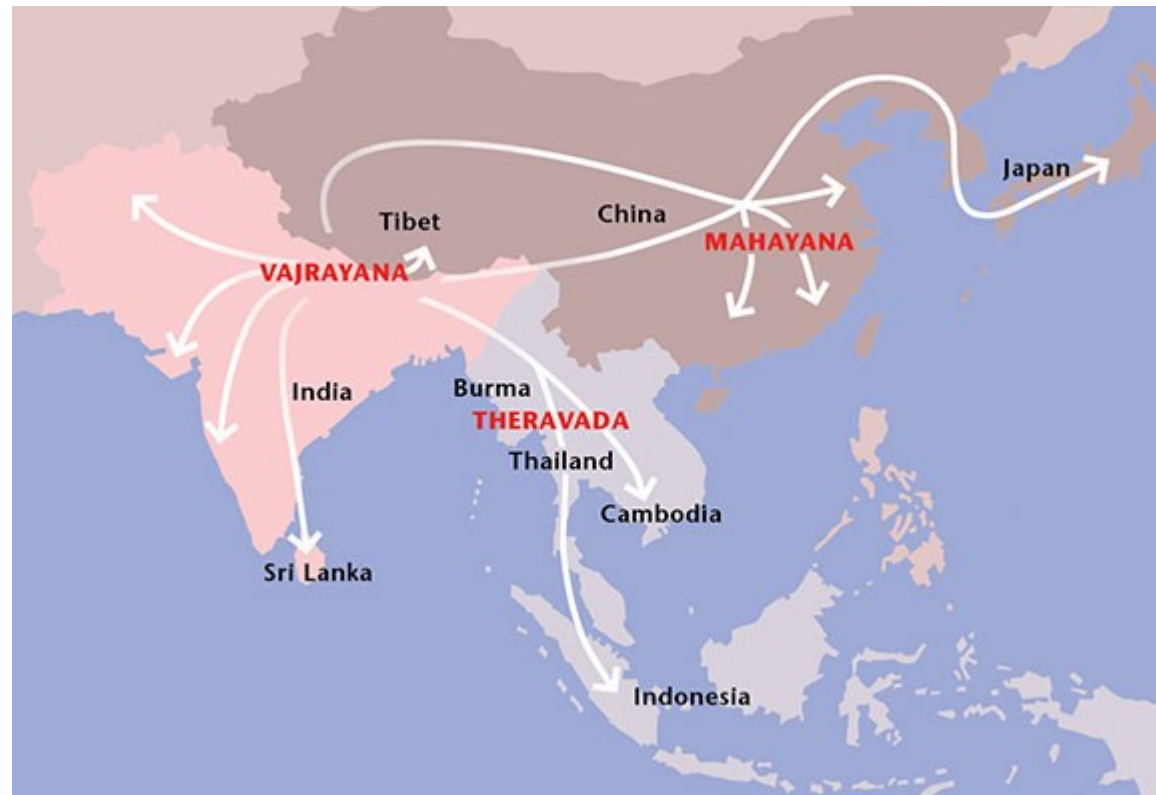


The Yoga source

- As Yoga is the likely source of the Eastern meditative process, let's look at the first three statements of the Yoga Sutra (formalized by Patanjali):
 1. **Now, the teachings of Yoga**
 2. **Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness**
 3. **Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature**
- The Sutra lays the foundation of a meditative practice and is very much integral to Buddhism and subsequently, Zen.
- Zen, is in fact, essentially meditation, to 'still the mind' as it were.

Historical Context

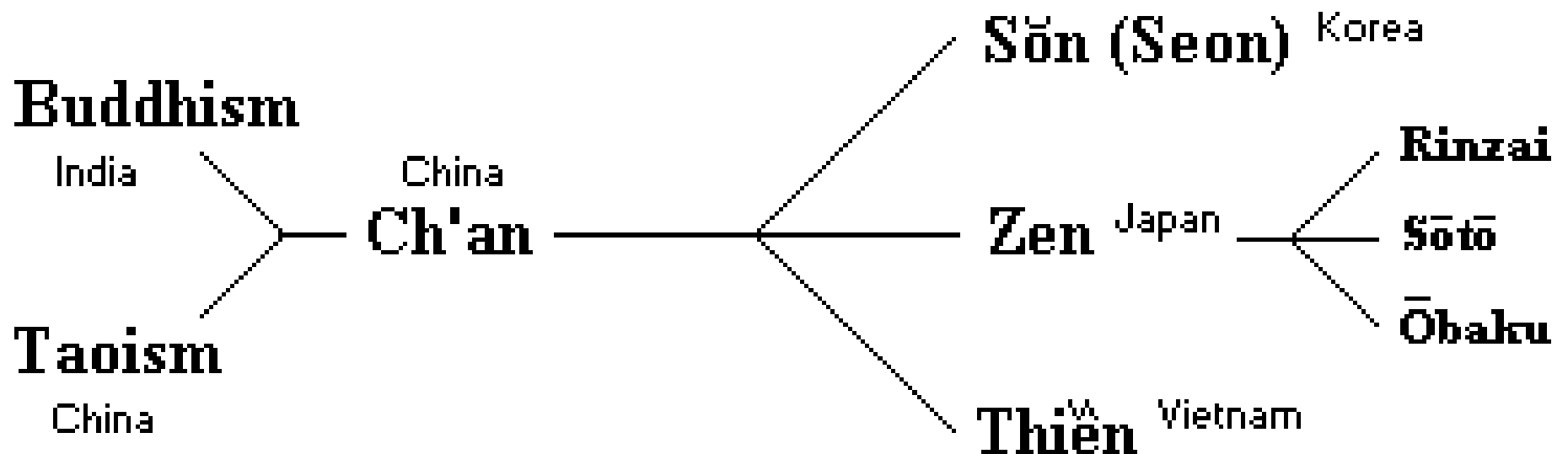
As Buddhism migrated northward from India to China (year 200 CE) it was influenced by the Tao (which existed 700 years prior) to create a distinctive form of Chinese Buddhism (Mahayana), *Chán* or Zen then progressively made its way to other neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Korea and Japan.



Zen: a fusion of Indian Buddhism and the Chinese Tao

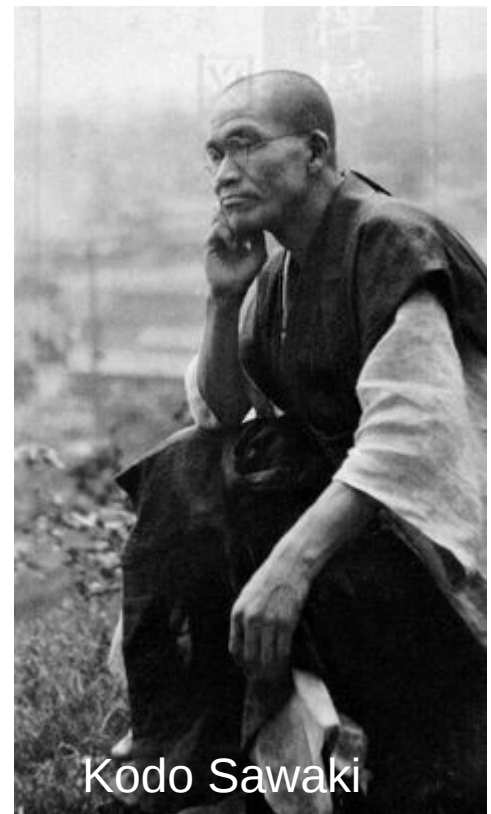
Known as the 'Way', Tao is fundamental to Zen;

- Oneness – Every being is an expression of the Tao
- Dynamic Balance – from the One come yin and yang
- Cyclical growth - from yin to yang to yin...
- Harmonious Action – achieving by not achieving

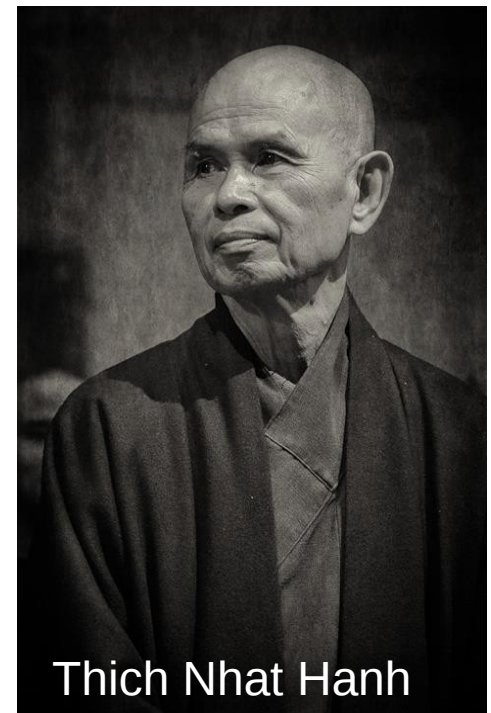


Zen Today

- In the West, Zen was popularized by authors such as Reginald Horace Blyth, Alan Watts, Philip Kapleau and D. T. Suzuki
- Influential Zen masters include Kodo Sawaki and Taisen Deshimaru from the Japanese schools.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, originally from Vietnam, is probably the most well known Zen master today.
- These schools have a rich development of artistic principles to enhance their Zen practice as we shall see.



Kodo Sawaki



Thich Nhat Hanh

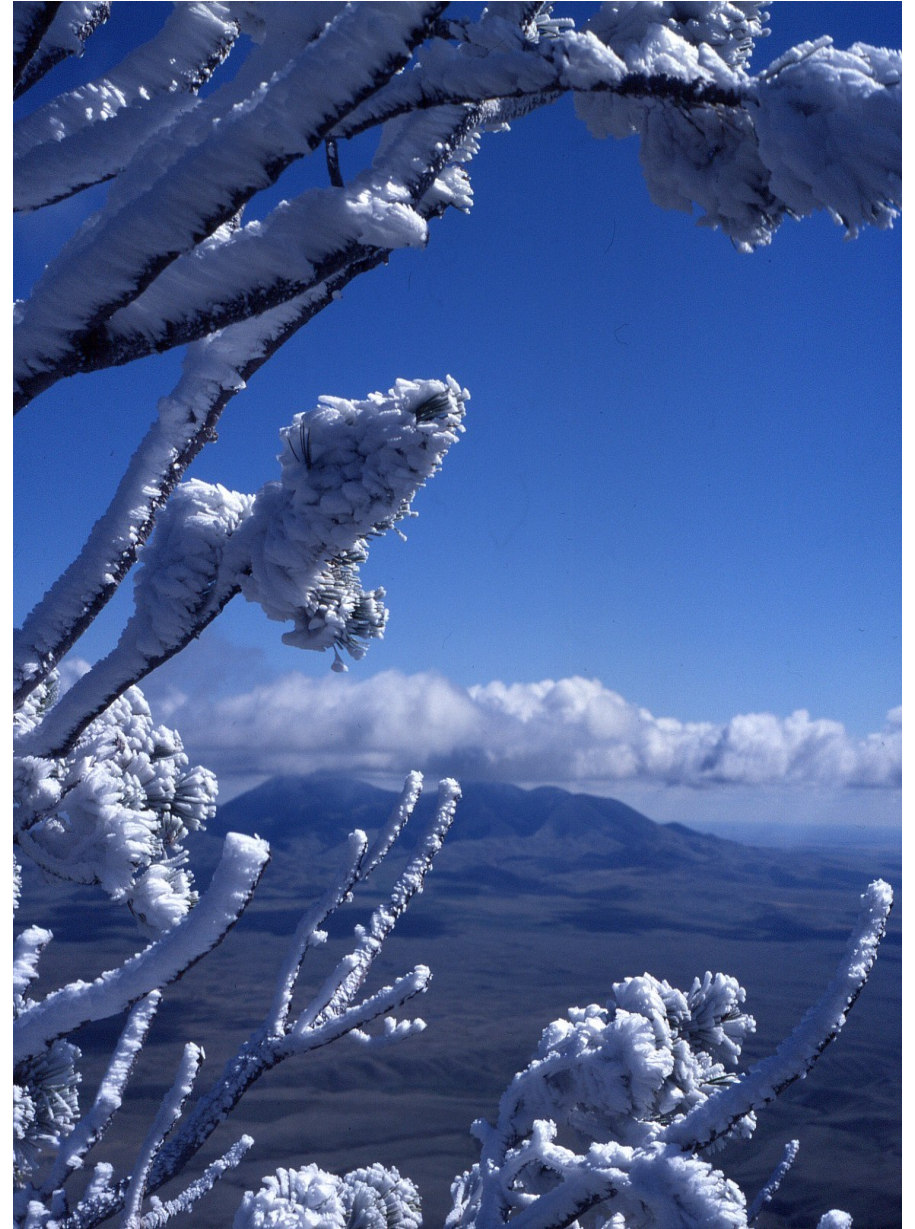
Aesthetic mechanisms in art:

Principles of visual design

- Emphasis placed on technique to organize photographic space:
 - Rule of thirds.
 - Object-space balance/tension,
 - Tonal and color contrast,
 - Object repetition, texture
- Image dynamics are driven by eye movement which in turn is a biological engine of sorts.
- Visual communication/impact is paramount

Aesthetic mechanisms in art:

Balance, tension, contrast, repetition, eye dynamics



Aesthetic basis of Zen art

- The Zen photographer, tries to suggest by the *simplest* possible means, the inherent nature of the aesthetic object.
- The job of the photographer is to suggest the essence, the eternal qualities of the object, which is in itself a work of natural art before the artist arrives on the scene.
- To achieve this, the photographer must fully understand the inner nature of the aesthetic object, to be 'one with it', if you will. A communion with surrounding nature is the eventual outcome.

Aesthetic basis of Zen art

'Essence' and 'Inner nature'

There is an
element of
experiencing
image objects

...

of 'knowing' the
qualities of the
objects in the
photos

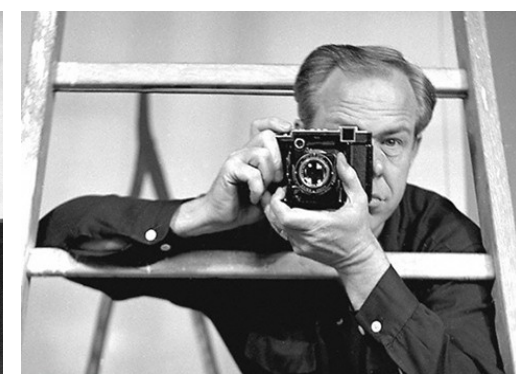
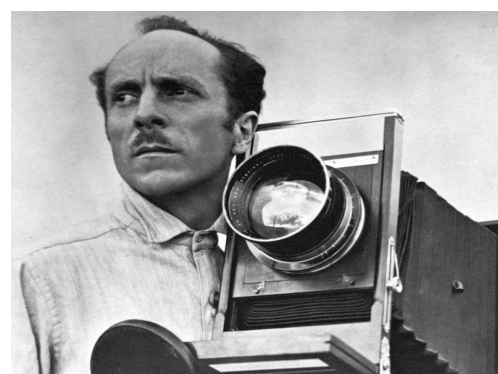
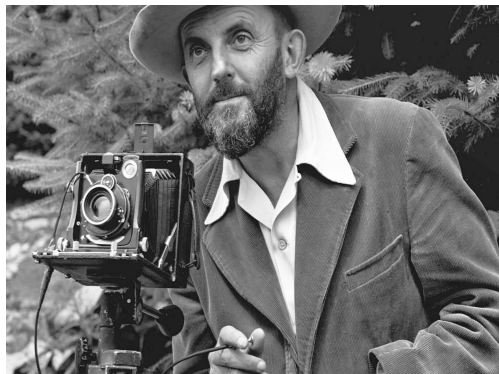
...

it imbues them
a dimension
apart from the
pure mechanics
of picture taking



Zen and the photography masters

Zen aesthetics and its Taoist core philosophy is very much embodied in some of the twentieth century's most prominent photographers; Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Edward Weston, Minor White, just to name some, are synonymous with the development of photographic art. And, although Zen was relatively obscure in the West at the time that these photographers were at their zenith, all of them embodied a Zen spirit in their work and outlook...



Ansel Adams



“When words become unclear, I shall focus with photographs. When images become inadequate, I shall be content with silence.”

“A great photograph is a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is thereby a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety.”

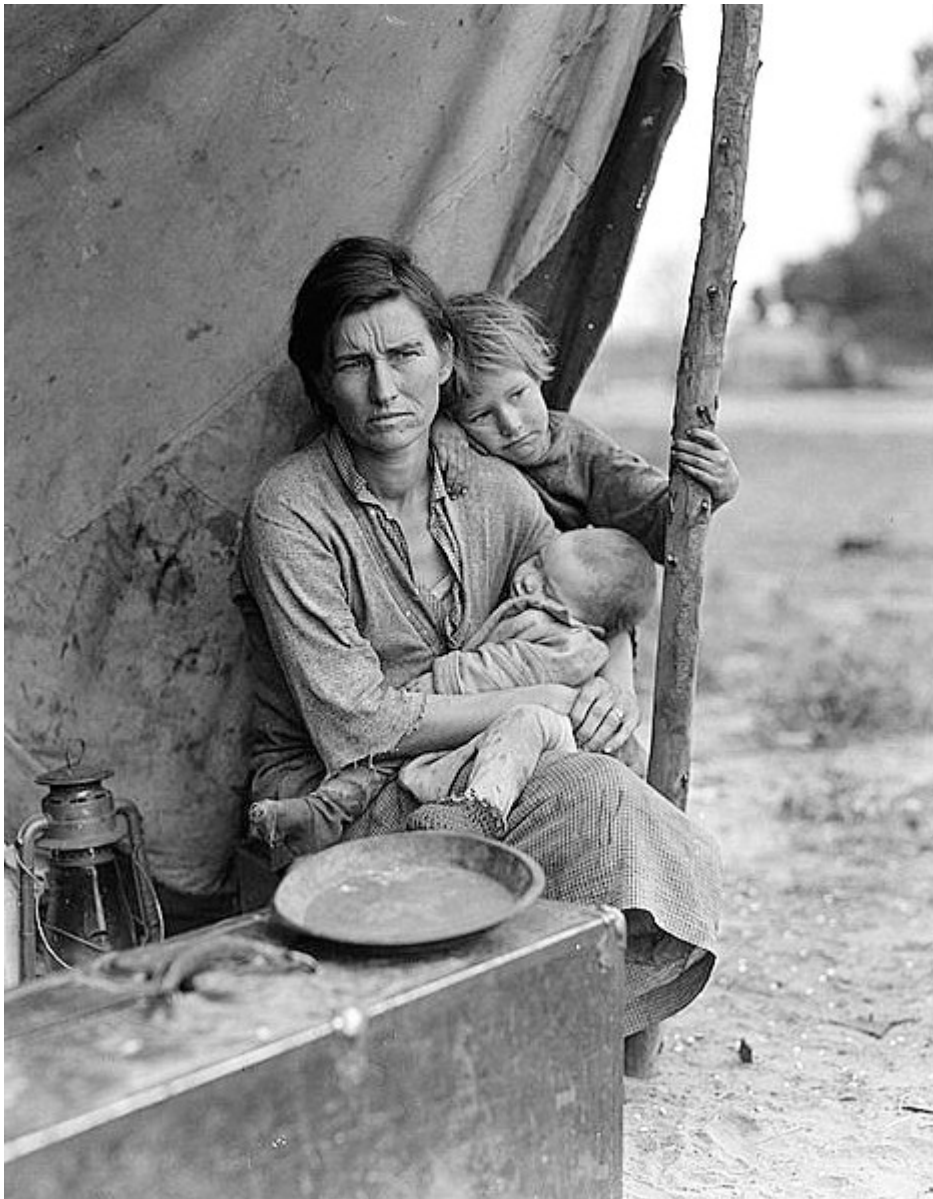


Edward Weston

On artistic expression: “I am no longer trying to 'express myself', to impose my own personality on nature, but without prejudice, without falsification *to become identified with nature, to see or 'know' things as they are, their very essence..*”.



Dorothea Lange

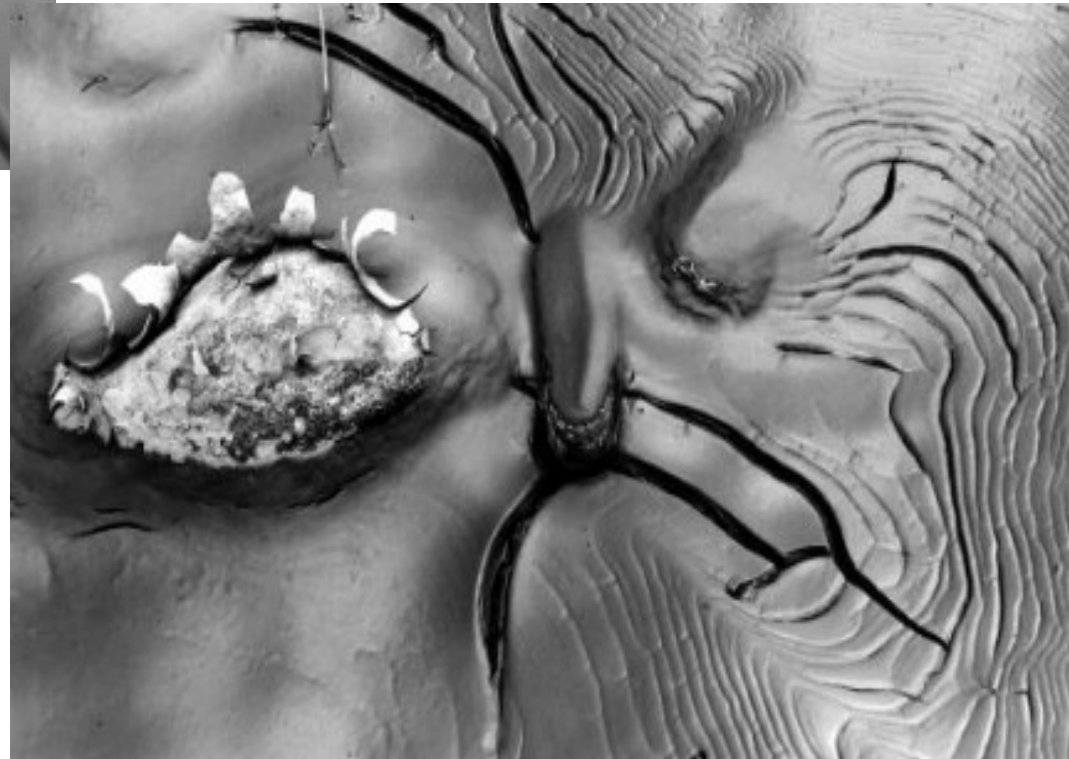


“Photographers stop photographing a subject too soon before they have exhausted the possibilities (of *seeing*)”.

Minor White

“The photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better.”

“When I looked at things for what they are I was fool enough to persist in my folly and found that each photograph was a mirror of my Self.”



The Zen Aesthetic

Guiding Principles

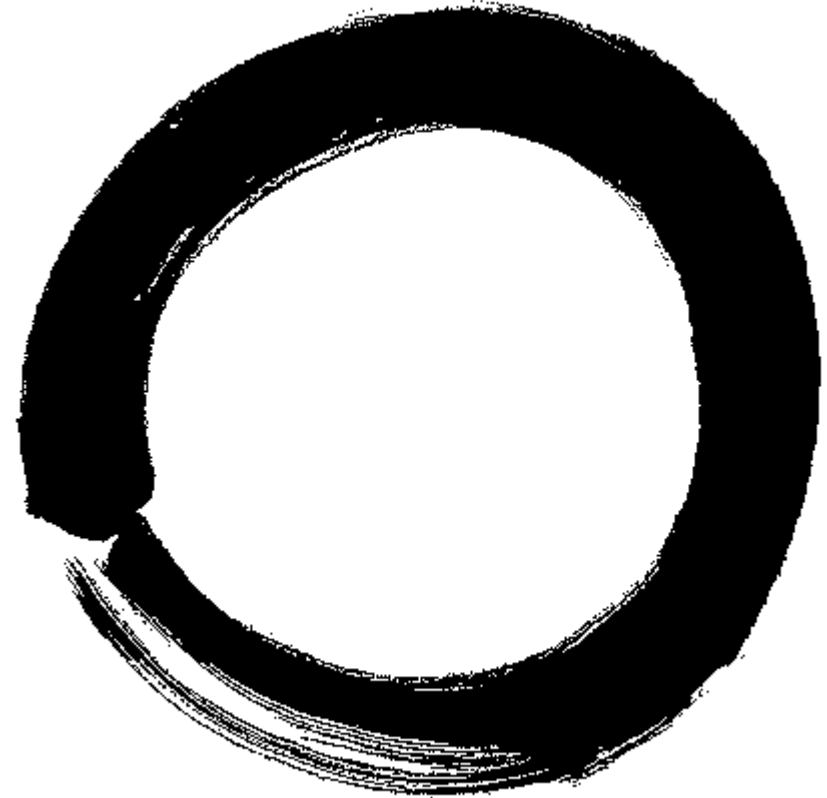
From calligraphy to the design of Japanese gardens, an aesthetic sensitivity has always been an integral part of the traditional Zen practice. Its application to the photographic arts is a natural extension.

- **Simplicity***
- **Irregularity**
- **Understatement**
- **Naturalness***
- **Suggestion**
- **Freedom***
- **Tranquility**
- **Emptiness**

* Rooted in the Tao

Applying the artful practice of Zen..

- The Japanese Zen garden: Simplicity, Tranquility, Understatement.



- The calligraphic Zen enso circle: Irregularity, Suggestiveness, Freedom.

Kanso - Simplicity

- Simplicity or elimination of clutter. Eliminating clutter is also a guiding principle in western art.
- Things are expressed in a plain, simple, natural manner.
- Reminds us to think not in terms of decoration but in terms of clarity, a kind of clarity that may be achieved through omission or exclusion of the non-essential.
- The Tao of photography: Can you see all in the one?

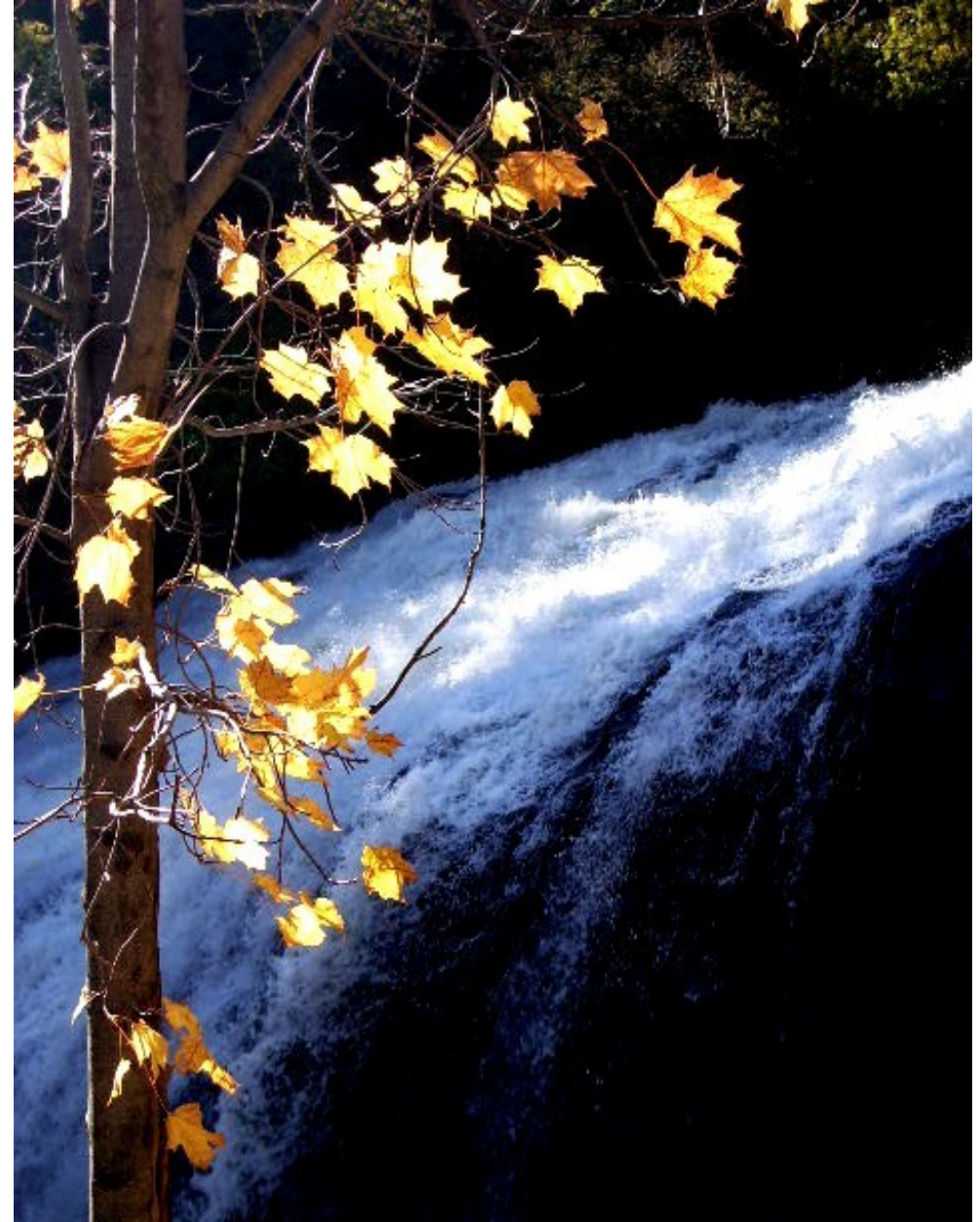
Kanso – Simplicity

Image examples



Kanso – Simplicity

Image examples



Fukinsei - Irregularity

- The idea of controlling balance in a composition via irregularity and asymmetry
- Beauty in balanced asymmetry.
- Nature itself is full of beauty and harmonious relationships that are asymmetrical yet balanced. This is a dynamic beauty that attracts and engages.
- The goal of fukinsei is to convey the symmetry of the natural world through clearly asymmetrical and incomplete renderings.
- The Tao of photography: It is what it isn't

Fukinsei – Irregularity

Image examples



Fukinsei – Irregularity

Image examples



Shibui - Understatement

- Beautiful by being understated
- Precisely what it was meant to be and not elaborated upon.
- Direct and simple, articulate brevity. Similar to the 'Simplicity' category
- Something beautifully minimalist
- The Tao of photography: Achieve by not achieving, take your best photo by taking your worst!

Shibui – Understatement

Image examples



Shibui – Understatement

Image examples



Shizen - Naturalness

- Absence of pretense or artificiality, full creative intent unforced.
- Design is not an accident, even when we are trying to create a natural-feeling environment.
- Design is harmonious with the action of a naturally evolving universe.
- The Tao of photography: *Wu-wei*, effortless effort, action without action, the photograph 'finds' the photographer: the photographer is merely a recorder of parts of a whole.

Shizen – Naturalness

Image examples



Shizen – Naturalness

Image examples

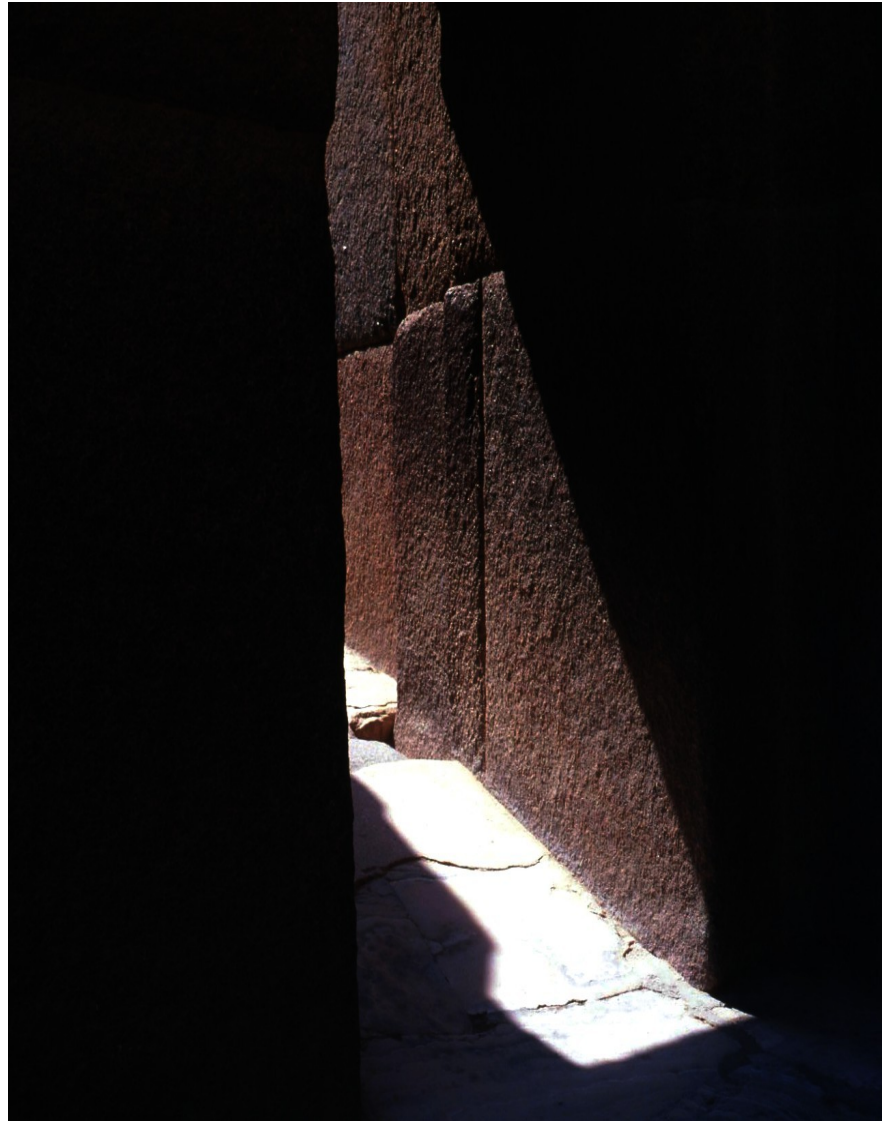


Yogen - Suggestion

- A collection of subtleties and symbolic elements.
- The parts of a whole
- The essence of the whole is suggested by its parts
- This theme also 'suggests' the interconnectedness of all things.
- The Tao of photography: Can you see what you cannot see.

Yogen – Suggestion

Image examples



Yogen – Suggestion

Image examples

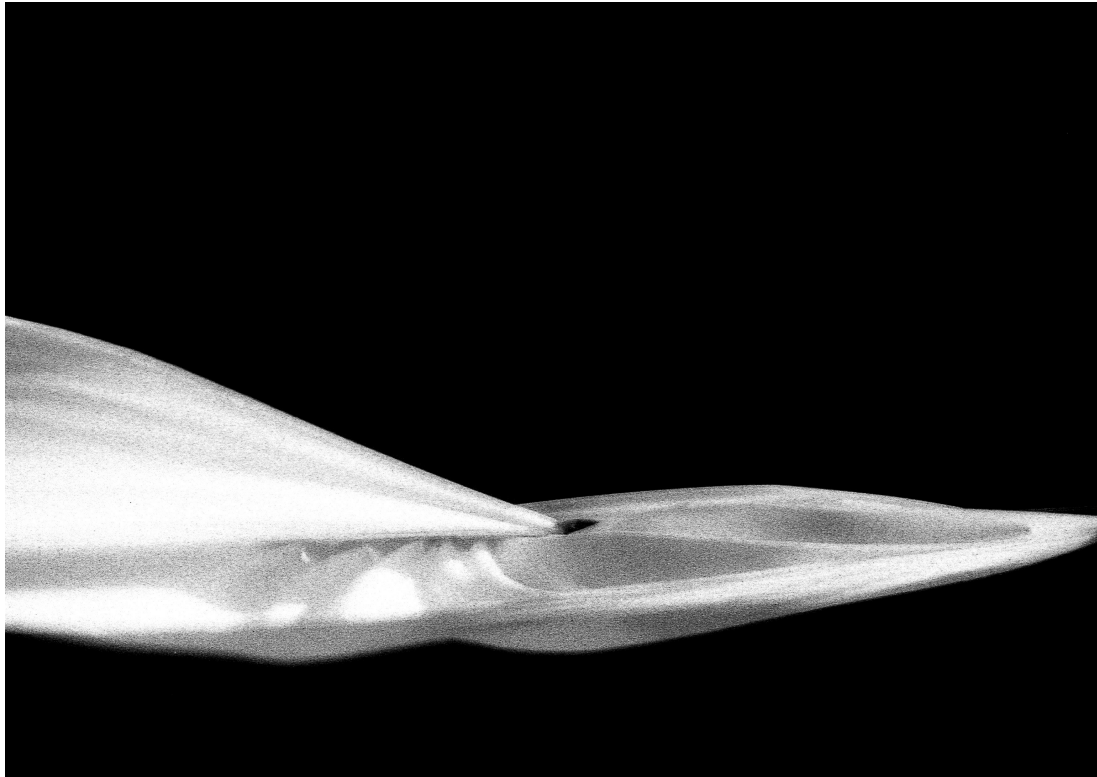


Datsuzoku - Freedom

- Escape from routine or the ordinary.
- Unworldly, Transcending the conventional.
- Feeling of surprise, of amazement from the conventional.
- Let go of visual expectation and conformity
- The Tao of Photography: See nothing and you will see everything!

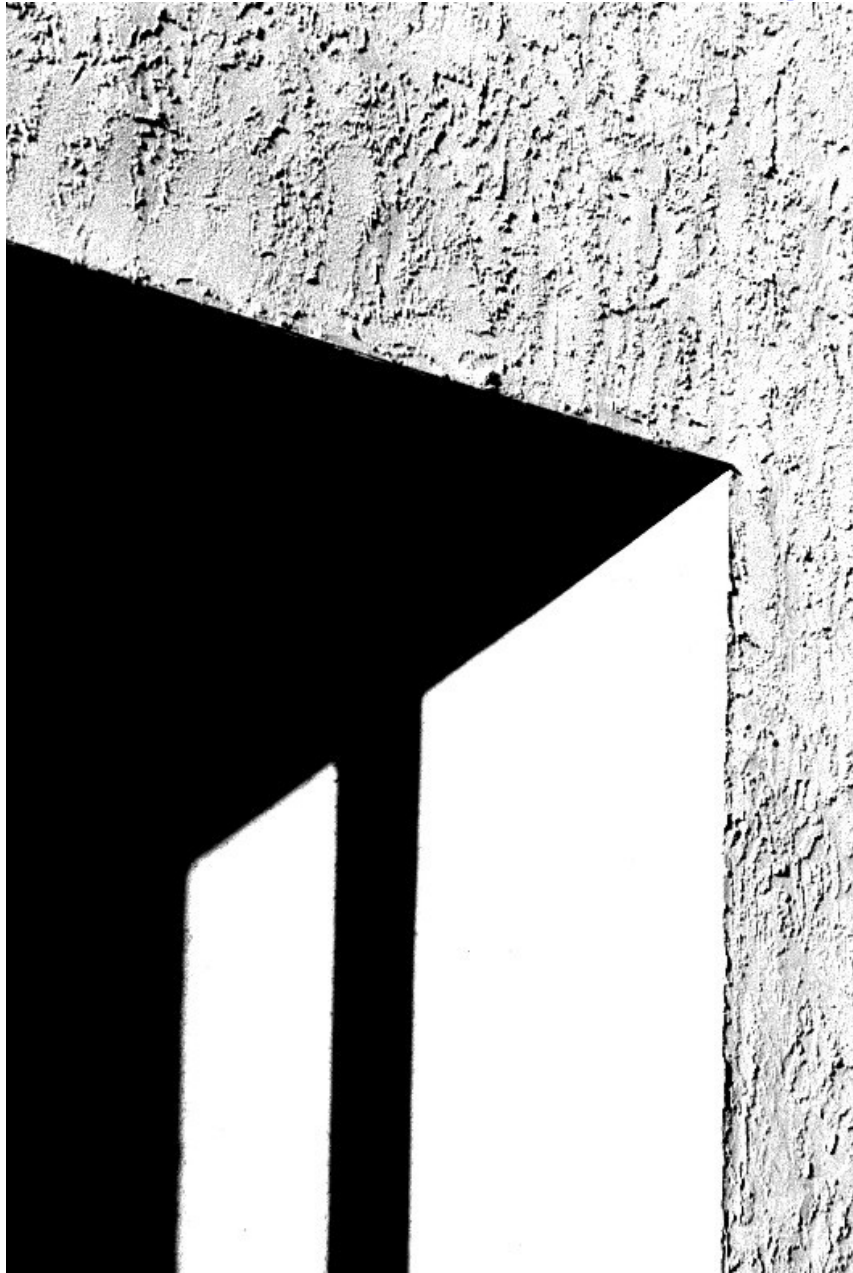
Datsuzoku – Freedom

Image examples



Datsuzoku – Freedom

Image examples



Seijaku - Tranquility

- An energized calm (quiet), stillness, solitude.
- This is related to the feeling you may have when in a Japanese garden.
- This is not necessarily related to a 'calm' place
- As photographers we are tranquil observers of nature's flow – that of evolving space and time – and, we occasionally record that flow with our cameras
- The Tao of photography: Practice active calmness!

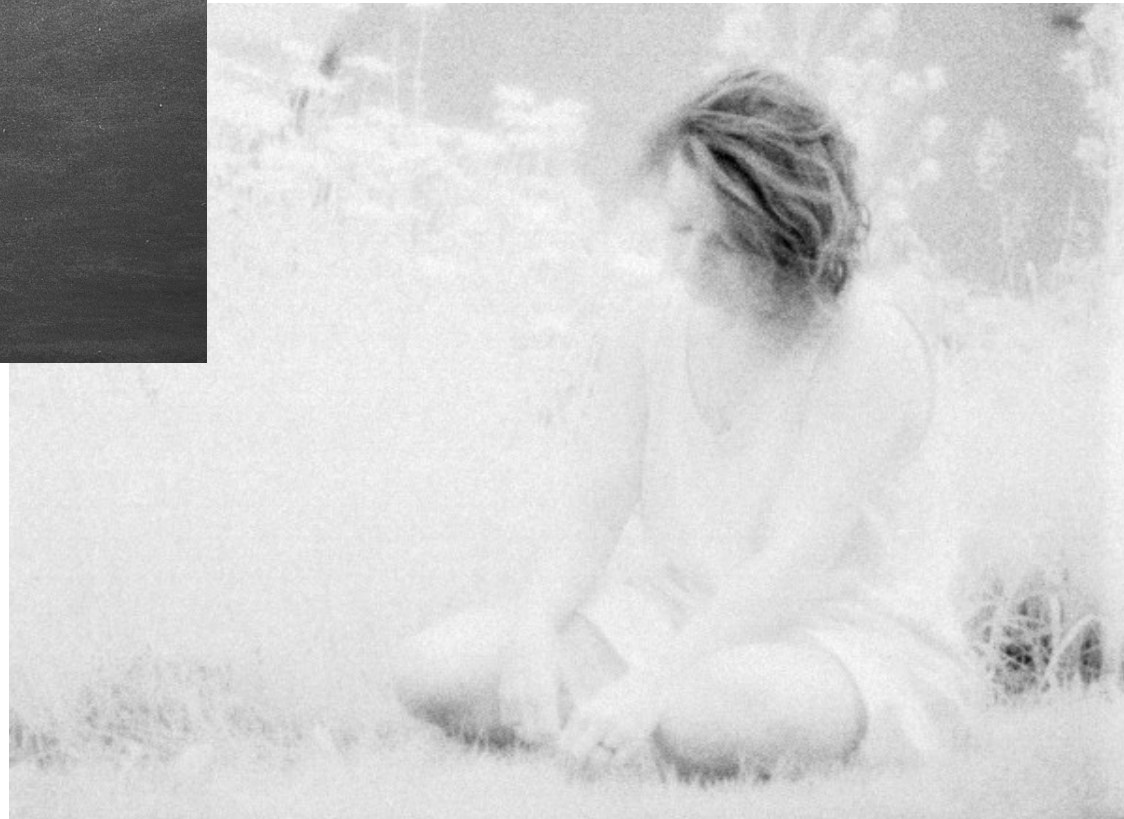
Seijaku – Tranquility

Image examples



Seijaku – Tranquility

Image examples



Sumi-e style

'Painting by not painting': Emptiness

- Balancing form with space
- Knowing when one has said enough
- Enabling the relative emptiness of an image
- The challenge is how to photograph nothing and yet, everything is said in the photo
- The power of the image is in what has not been photographed
- Minimalism is an apt corollary

Sumi-e style

Examples



In Summary..

To quote Alan Watts (The Way of Zen),
regarding the art of Zen:

“..aimless life is a constant theme..expressing the
artist's own inner state of going nowhere in a
timeless moment.”, p.181

The aesthetic principles are meant to evoke
such moments of clarity when:

“..the smell of burning leaves on a morning of
autumn haze, a flight of sunlit pigeons against a
thundercloud, the sound of an unseen waterfall at
dusk..is an echo of such (timeless) moments.”

Now, the practice of looking deeply..

If Zen photography were simply an application of a few aesthetic principles then basically we would be finished with the course.

But the 'Zen' in photography really moves us into a totally other realm in how we look and create our photographic compositions. It is the Zen practice of 'looking deeply'; it means:

- **Practicing mindfulness in our photography**
- **Seeing impermanence in our photography**
- **Observing 'no-self' in our photography**
- **Experiencing nirvana in our existence**

These are called the Buddha's Dharma Seals and as photographers we have a unique vantage point in their application and experience.

Photographing mindfully

Practicing Zen photography means being *mindful* of your photographic present moment

- Your mind is clear and completely focused on the scene in your viewfinder
- You are conscience of every detail in your scene, you are aware of the all the *interactions* of the objects in the scene
- You see how the light interacts with all the objects and how it reflects back to your eyes and camera
- As a photographer, you have the *technical skill* to represent the scene the way you envision it.



The Mindful Photographer

Ansel Adams spent hours taking a single photograph, he called it 'previsualization': the act of seeing the final image before exposure by ensuring that every detail in the final image was *exactly* the way he envisioned it.

Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh tells us to breathe, concentrate, and be aware. As photographers we can easily put these basics into a photographic practice that makes our photography a truly mindful experience..

Mindful techniques

- If possible, sit and observe in the environment you are photographing
- Focus on your breath to clear your mind and just observe your scene. Let any thoughts that come to you just melt away, just focus on the objects in your scene
- Begin to **see** your scene's objects and interplays. Look at their light, where is it coming from? Consider your Zen aesthetic principles which one(s) are you engaging?
- Simplify the object interplays, let no more than two objects define your centre of focus
- Manually adjust your exposure and shutter such that you capture the **nature** of what you are experiencing
- You are in the present photographic moment

Mindful techniques

- Consider a few of Zen's aesthetic principles:
 - **Simplicity**
 - Most scenes are cluttered, focus in on one or two elements of the scene to distill what you think or feel of the scene.
 - Use a zoom lens or get closer to show the nature your interest
 - Open your aperture such that only your object(s) of interest are in focus (low depth-of-field)
 - Let your photo exude the 'texture and feel' of the maple seed scene



Mindful techniques

Suggestion

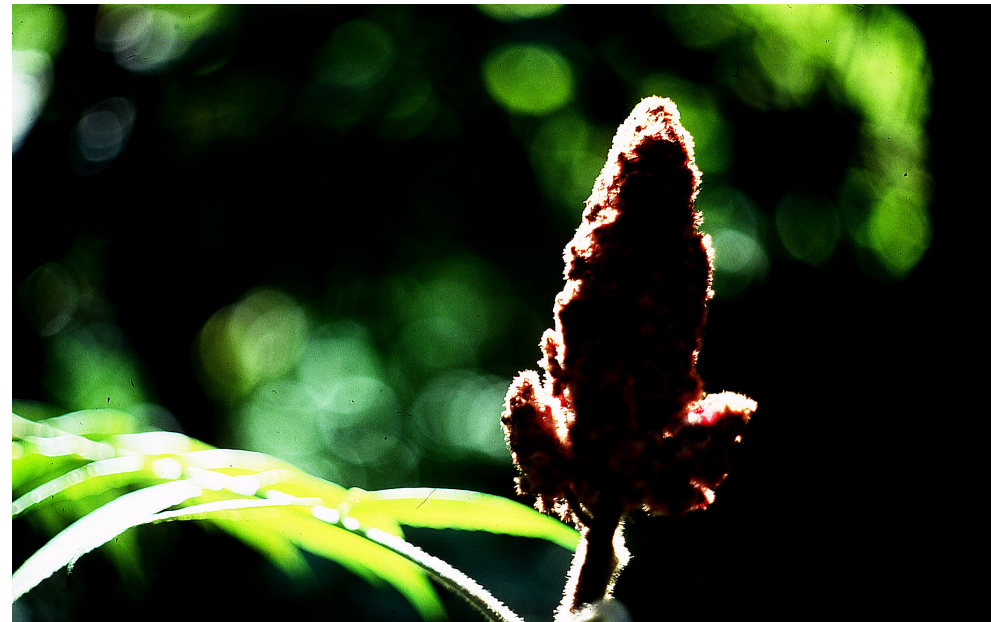
- Your object(s) and composition suggest a bigger 'picture', a larger reality
- Intentionally crop your subject in the viewfinder such that only a partial view of the scene is available
- Let the viewer fill in the blanks
- Let your photo exude the 'blockiness' of the scene



Mindful techniques

Naturalness

- As you look at your scene contemplate on the objects' *flow*
- See if you can photograph the 'nature' of this flow: the lines of the blades of grass, the globules of sumac fruit..remember, you are recording an instant of the flow of nature: the Tao
- Combined with other Zen elements (simplicity, suggestion, tranquility etc..) the images become not only powerful visual designs but also help focus the mind on the interweaving parts of nature.



Mindful techniques

Freedom

Challenge your perception, become aware beyond photographic convention:

- Shoot out of focus or minimize your depth-of-field, look 'into your image' and see if you can create with tonal variations
- Overexpose/Underexpose intentionally, let your image highlights/shadows merge into the surrounding space
- Be mindful of what lies beyond our senses. Infrared photographic techniques allow us to explore the realm of the unseen.



From photographing mindfully to photographic meditation

As we continue to engage in the present moment of our photography something truly unique begins to unfold:

- Our photographs begin to exude a power of presence and purpose, not surprisingly since we are fully engaged in our photographic act.
- We begin to 'know' the essence of the subject we are photographing; we are reflected in its nature. Psychologists define this as a process of projection and identification.

Photographic Meditation

Inviting the bell (singing bowls) is quintessential in Buddhist meditation practice, as you hear the sound of the bell you follow your breathing. The mantra would be:

“Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home”

'Chanting from the Heart'
By Thich Nhat Hanh



When meditating on a scene to photograph the light vibrations hitting your eyes is the 'bell' that tells you to look at this present moment, you are here:

“Look, look, this wonderful light brings me back to my true home”

**'True home' is the ever impermanence
of the present moment**

On knowing the 'Essence' of things

In the book 'Present Moment, Wonderful Moment' Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us how to live in mindfulness in every activity that we do.

He encourages us to look deeply into our actions, for example, washing vegetables is possible because of the water flowing in your tap and all the actions that allowed it be as such.

The vegetables are in your hands because of all the consequent actions that led them there. The cause-effect thought process is central to Zen and is the dharma of Buddhism. It is *pratiya-samutpada* or '**co-dependent origination**'.

Photographing the 'Essence' of things

How would we approach photographing the dharma of a scene? Certainly using the Zen aesthetic principles is helpful but here are a few more techniques:

- Try to distill the physical 'essence' of the object(s) in your photography (and photograph) – the woodiness (grain, texture, color) of a table, the leafyness of the grass, the motion of water in a stream...can you photograph the warmth of the sun?
- See if you can relate the object(s) with some other feature in your scene that it is a *result of* or a *consequent of*. This is the action of dharma, cosmic law and order, cause and effect.

Some examples



Thich Nhat Hanh - FB

When we look deeply at a flower, we can see the whole cosmos is contained in it..Thich Nhat Hanh

Photographing the dharma



What are the cause-effect object relationships, what is the dharma?

Looking deeply at the impermanence of a scene

As our photography provides us with opportunity to observe the cause-effect of the dharma, photography is also an excellent tool to consider the Dharma Seal of Impermanence:



As we observe the two 'frozen' photographic moments we know that those moments are forever changed: the children never again will run in that state and the mushrooms and grass are transitory, to be transformed into...



The trees are water, the sun the flower..



Cause and effect,
co-dependent origination,
a wholistic perception of the
impermanent universe:
this is the practice of the
photographic dharma, of
Zen photography..



Zen Photography as a means to an end: what end?

Summing up thus far: as Zen photographers we are capturing instants of the Tao, the 'Flow' and we become aware of its interactive dharma nature through our use of Zen's eight aesthetic principles.

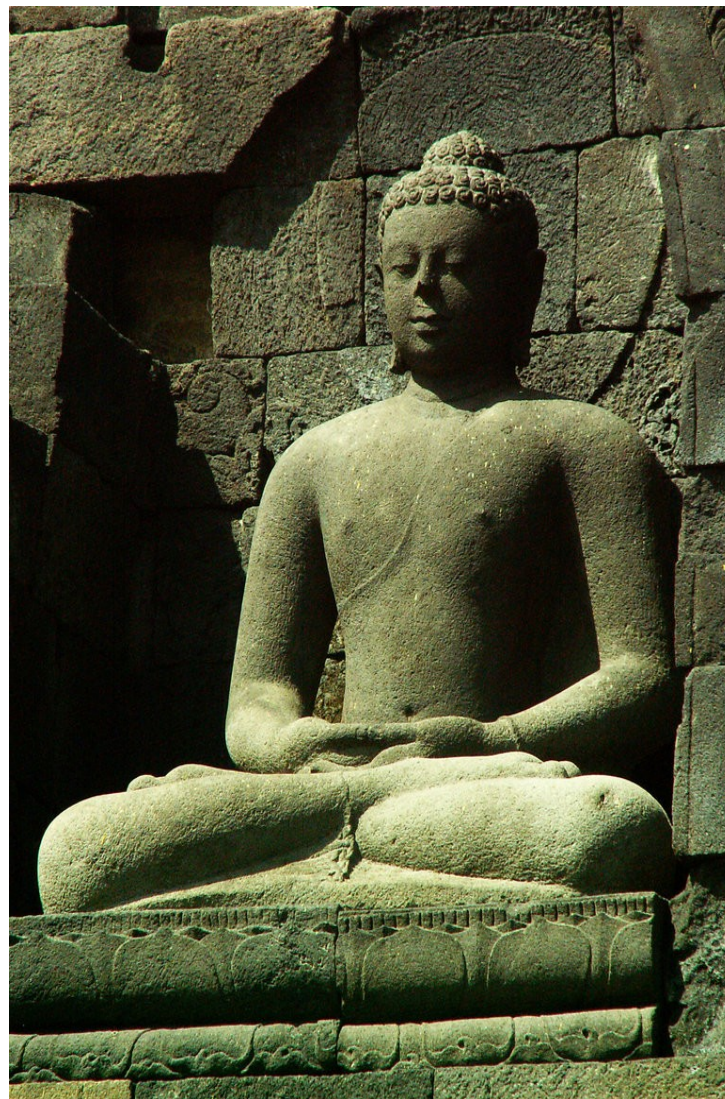
But what role do we play as photographer, as observer?

The answer leads us to the last tenet of photographing with a Zen awareness, the concept of no-self. Minor White referred to this as we being “indistinguishable from the scene we are photographing”.

Observing the self

The core experience in meditation is to observe our thought flow and let it dissipate through our focus on breathing. The experience is one of observing our self (our mind) in this act of letting go of the constant stream of thoughts. As observer we are devoid of thought, of judgement, of attachment, we simply exist in the stillness and breath of the present moment. The practice ultimately leads to no distinction between the observer and observed; the mind is stilled.

(Yoga's second Sutra)



DHYANA 'meditation' mudra

The self in photography

- A rationalist argument can be made that other than selfies and self portraits, the photographer is never part of the photograph he/she takes.
- An alternative view is that *every* photograph is a portrait of the photographer, portrayed by either overt interests in the objects photographed or by symbolic associations of the objects. This view, infact, prevails among the most visionary and accomplished of photographers (as we've seen earlier).



Observing the self in photography

If photographs are constructs of our selves then it is possible to observe that self through *identification* of the objects photographed. Our attribution of meaning (symbols) to the objects in the scene lays bare our self (ego) and engages us in the meditative act of observing our self.

Creating the symbolic image storyline is engaging in western based photography, observing the process is Zen.

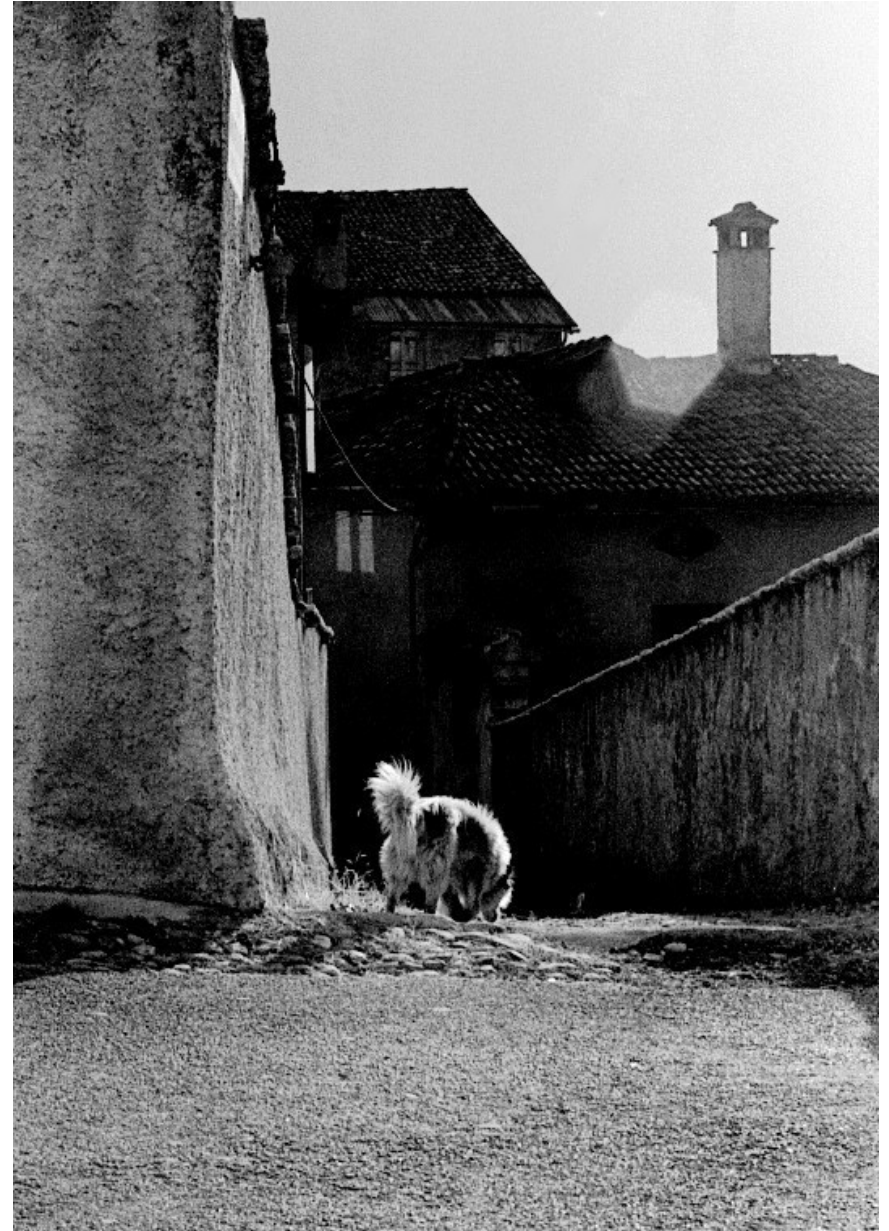


Deconstructing the form of self in photographs

The photograph, as a symbolic reflection of the Self:

Objects Symbols

- Dog – companionship, play
 - Walls (left,right) – containment
 - Alley, road – the Way, the future
 - Dark buildings – a somber shelter.
- What is the *artistic* story
- What is the *symbolic* story
- What is the *dharmic* story?



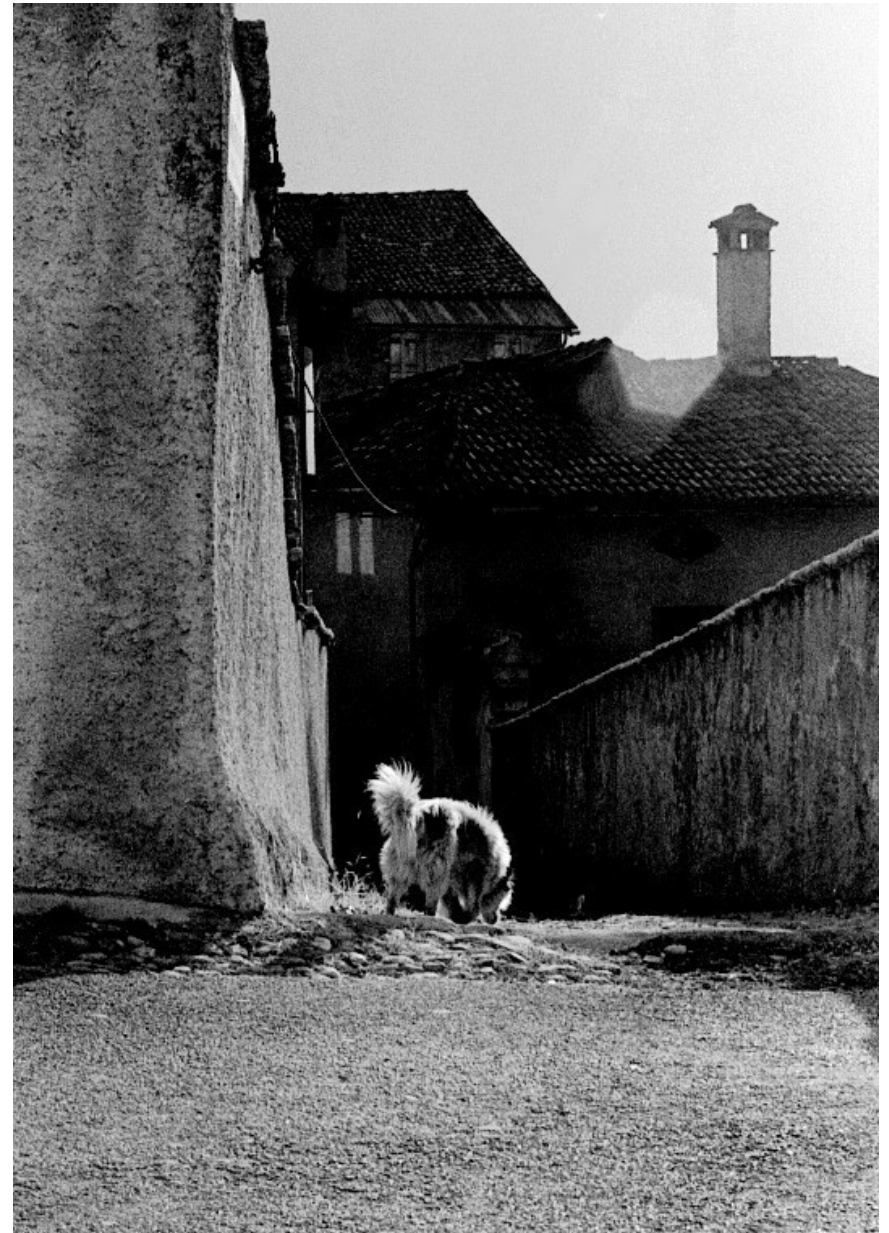
The extinction of self in photographs

From the photograph as an artistic work that simply exists as form, content, subject matter,

To the photograph as a mandala for introspection, a symbolic means for reflecting the Self (remember Minor White: “..each photograph was a mirror of my Self.”)

To the photograph as a dharmic microcosm for observing nature's oneness,

Photographic meditation ultimately leads to a fusion subject matter and ego identification, the observer and the observed this is Zen concept of 'no-self'.



Zen Photography and No-self

- As our Zen photography leads us to observe our Self and the interaction and deep unity of all things, we ultimately experience that we are one with all we photograph.
- In that contemplation of the objects we photograph and their connectedness to a greater whole, our sense of self becomes indistinguishable from our environment, the universe that we are part of, it is what Edward Weston alludes in his comment:

“..to become identified with nature, to see or 'know' things as they are, their very essence..”

and it is the meaning of the third statement of the Yoga Sutra:

Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature

- In Zen, the Dharma Seal of 'no-self' is the eventual outcome of a Zen meditative practice.

The Buddha's 'Emptiness'

We reach the end the course with a discourse from the Buddha: The Buddha was once asked, “If there is no self, then who is this speaking to you here, and what is this world I see?”. In response, the Buddha placed a pile of rice on the ground and said “The self is like this pile of rice, when you look at it, it seems to be one whole entity, when you look closer it breaks down into grains of rice and those grains can be broken down further. Thus, things appear to have form, yet they are empty of form”.

Photographic Emptiness

To state that the goal in our photography is to be empty of form is radical; form is the very essence of a photographic endeavor (at least from a western perspective).

But form is an illusion that results in not being able to perceive the whole, only the unconnected disparate parts of the whole. More appropriately we miss seeing the unity or interconnectedness of things.

Photographing in a Zen manner takes us beyond form, the end is not the flower, it is the flower as a part of all that allowed us to photograph it at that moment, the form of the flower transitory. We perceive the parts and the whole simultaneously and we also know that we are part of that whole. We are seeing the expression of Tao, our photography is our Zen practice.

The Zen photographic moment: no space, no time



References

Zen Photography books

Zen and the Magic of Photography- Wayne Rowe

The Tao of Photography – Phillippe Gross and S.I. Shapiro

Zen and the Art of Photography – Wayne Rowe

<http://www.csupomona.edu/~jis/2001/Rowe.pdf>

The Zen of Photography – Paul Lester

The Practice of Contemplative Photography – A.Karr,M.Wood

Zen Buddhist books

The Way of Zen – Alan Watts

Present Moment, Wonderful Moment - Thich Nhat Hanh

No Fear No Death - Thich Nhat Hanh

Turning the Mind into an Ally – Sakyong Mipham

Assignment

- Expose three (3) images. For each image use **one (1)** of the Zen aesthetic principles to base your composition.
- Place on a USB stick and bring to the next class
- Select one of your three images and be prepared to discuss:
 - How did you achieve your aesthetic goal (the principle)
 - Describe the photographic dharma: what cause-effect relationships are at play in your image?
 - Optional. Try to describe the concept of 'pure awareness, observer, no-self': symbolize the key objects and describe the **symbolic** story of your image.