Your Inner Gift: Cultivating the Art of Simplicity in Photography

Session 3: *The "I" – seeking simplicity within oneself*

Our last session dealt with ways of mindfully "seeing" – *visualizing* – the world (ostensibly to find subject matter for our cameras), though stressed at the outset that what is on the outside, what we train our eyes and soul on, is inextricably entwined with our inner landscapes. Session 3 expands on this theme; the idea that all of our outwardly directed efforts to find simplicity and beauty "out there" in the world will come to naught if we cannot find the calm center in our own deepest selves, and from which all creative works naturally spring forth. Indeed, there are many artists who believe that their best works come about as a kind of dynamic interplay between self and environment; via a co-creation, or a *communion*, with nature. Practical methods to help achieve a mindful receptivity to this kind of inner state will be introduced.

Photography lives at the *cusp* of inner and outer landscapes

> *"Once upon a time, I, Chuang* Tzu*, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, a veritable butterfly, enjoying itself to the full of its bent, and not knowing it was Chuang* Tzu*. Suddenly I awoke, and came to myself, the veritable Chuang* Tzu*. Now I do not know whether it was then I dreamt I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man. Between me and the butterfly there must be a difference. This is an instance of transformation."* – Chuang Tzu (369 -298 B.C.E.)

What better place to begin exploring inner and outer realities than Chuang Tzu (also referred to as Zhuangzi or Zhuang Zhou), one of my favorite Taoist sages and embodiments of ancient wisdom. Chuang Tzu's teachings are among the definitive texts on Taoism, and have exerted an enormous influence on the development of Chinese Buddhism, art, and poetry.[1] The quote above is among his best known stories, in which Chuang Tzu identifies at one point with Chuang Tzu, and at another with a butterfly. What is real, the dream or the dreamer; who *is* the dreamer? A story by Jorge Luis Borges ("The Circular Ruins"),[2] evokes a similar state of confusion over who, or what, is real. Chuang Tzu's and Borges' stories are both, fundamentally, meditations on art, the creative process, and *causa sui* (i.e., the idea that an object is the cause of itself). Noteworthy in Chuang Tzu's story, is the fact that the main character does not say, "I do not know if I am Chuang Tzu or a butterfly," but rather that he does not know whether he *dreamt* he was a butterfly, or that a butterfly was "dreaming I was a man."

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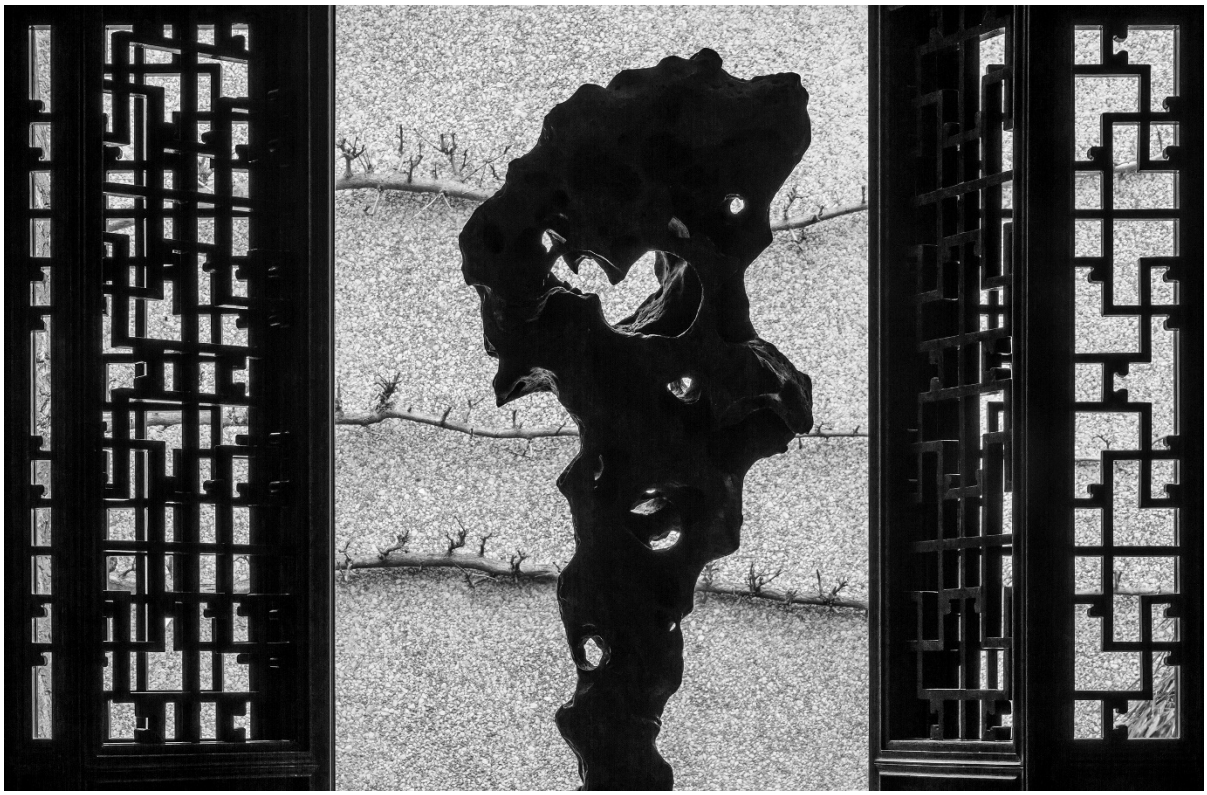
[1] His fame comes primarily from the book that also bears his name, *The Chuang Tzu*. Composed of 33 chapters (some believe the original had 50 or more), it is believed that Chuang Tzu himself authored the first seven chapters. The remaining chapter are most likely the product of his followers. Indeed, the anecdotes that are sprinkled throughout the later chapters provide a wonderful (and wonderfully comic) description of Chuang-Tzu's character. A wonderful selection of Chuang Tzu's stories and parables is: *The Way of Chaung Tzu*, by Thomas Merton (New Directions, 2010).

[2] https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/00/pwillen1/lit/cruins.htm.

This distinction is all important, since in the first case the interpretation would be that there is a central reality that may be temporarily confused as to its nature (man or butterfly); whereas, in the second case (as intended), the man, Chuang Tzu, and butterfly, are clearly not separate beings, but merely refer to alternative perspectives on reality. Along with all other things in the universe, they are but a part of the eternal flow, the *transformation* of things. Recall also our discussion of the holistic Goethian and Batesian "seeing" in Session 2.



S3-i1

Wandering Monks

There is also this wonderful story of wandering monks (bear with me as the connection with photography will be made clear soon enough).[3] The story begins by describing a Buddhist tradition in which a traveling monk can remain in a Zen temple provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with anyone who lives there. The reader is then told of a temple in the northern part of Japan were there are two brother monks: one, the elder; the other, stupid and possessing but one eye.

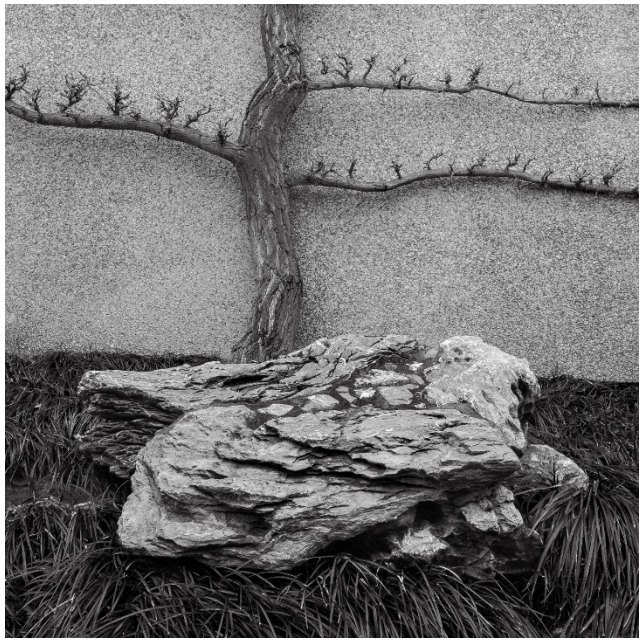
A traveling monk finds his way to this temple and rightfully challenges the monks to a debate. The elder brother, too tired from a long day of studying to engage in the challenge, asks his younger brother to "go and request the dialogue in silence" in his stead. The young one-eyed monk and the wandering stranger go to the shrine and sit down.

[3] The story comes from the classic book of Zen stories, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, by Paul Reps.

A short time later, the traveling monk goes to the elder brother to inform him that his brother has defeated him. Before leaving, the elder asks the monk to relate what had happened. The monk recounts the challenge: “At first, I held up one finger, denoting Buddha, the enlightened one. So, your brother held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teachings. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teachings, and his followers, living a harmonious life. Your brother then shook a clenched fist at me, showing me that all three come from the same - single - realization. To this insight I had no answer. I thus lost the challenge.”

As the traveling monk made his way back down the road away from the temple, the elder monk's brother appeared, breathless, before his brother. “Where is that monk?” he started, “I'm going to beat him up!” Asked to explain his anger, the younger brother recounts what happened: “Why, the minute he saw me he insulted me by holding up one finger to laugh at my one eye. Since he was a stranger, and in need of a place to stay, I decided to be kind and held up two fingers, congratulating him on having two eyes. Infuriatingly, he then held up three fingers, stubbornly reminding me that, between the two of us, we still had only three eyes. I couldn't contain my anger any longer, and showed him my fist!”

One reality, or two? Or three? How many other possible interpretations might there be? What I love about this simple story is how artfully it blends meaning, distortion, subjectivity, context, tradition, interpretation, and – with a subtle nod to an unspoken arbiter / truth-seer (not the elder brother, but an implied “outside observer” who is reflecting upon even the reader's interpretation of this story) – the recursive, self-referential nature of “true” objectivity; and, ultimately, the nature of "reality" itself. As space-time (so far as we know) is finite yet unbounded, so too this story suggests, reality is finite but unlimited in its interpretations.



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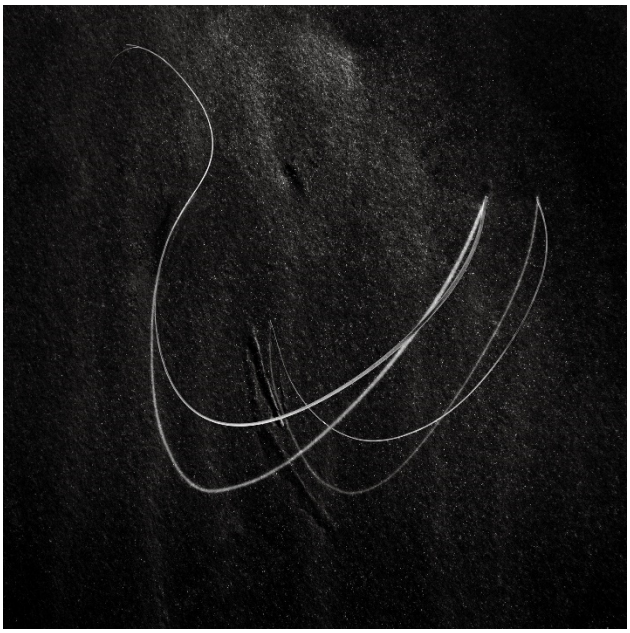
This story also suggests that, despite there *obviously being a reality* – there are two monks engaged in a Buddhist challenge! – no one in the story experiences it fully. Certainly not the two monks, with their dramatically different recollections of what happened; and not even the elder brother, who ostensibly hears "both sides" of the "reality," but is not himself present when it occurs, and who does not reveal any of his own predilections and subjective interpretations of what he hears from two different people (one of whom is very close to him, the other a complete stranger). Just what does he make of these two stories? We might just as well wonder about a "more complete" reality, that encompasses not just the two arguing monks but the *two monks + elder*. Is it even possible to imagine what form such an interpretation might take?

What does all of this have to do with photography? Everything (or nothing, depending on what part of the story one is paying attention to. The experience of the wandering monk reminds us that just as all of us ("privileged observers") sit at the center of a unique – and therefore *uniquely limited* – reality, the "true nature" of reality remains hidden, unknown in whole, and eludes even the mindful gaze of the wisest of wise "outside observers" (for there is no such being). Our understanding of reality is fluid, imprecise, and forever incomplete; and owes more – much, much more – to subjective context-dependent interpretation than most of us feel comfortable in accepting. A photograph may reveal two monks arguing, and show that one monk holds up one finger or two at the other, and/or that one monk is clenching a fist. But that is all a photograph can ever show. And, once it is created – and the "reality" to which it points has ceased to be – the "truth" of a photograph is forever limited to a sort of vestigial (and ever-changing) collective memory of possible interpretations that live on in the minds of those who "look at the photograph" and the photographer who *experienced* it while it was being taken.

And the lesson for the photographer? It is simply this: forget about trying to capture "truth" with your camera. Focus instead on communicating to the rest of the world what you *experienced as truth* (while immersed in the "reality" your camera recorded but an infinitesimally small slice of).

> *"When the photograph is a mirror of the man, and the man is a mirror of the world, then Spirit might take over."* – Minor White

Both of the above stories share an important creative element, albeit an implicit one. There is an ineffable *consciousness* – an "I" – rooted at the center of each. In Chuang Tzu's parable, the "I" is unnamed, but clearly lies at the heart of the matter. Neither the butterfly nor Chuang Tzu is *the* "I," but each lends a *perspective* on its always transient form. As for the wandering monks, there is the unspoken truth of a "storyteller" (who is not an explicit part of the story); an implicit "I" that dispassionately views the events as they unfold, and from whose narrative we learn about the ambiguity and elusiveness of interpretation. It is this same "I" that lies behind the "click" of your camera's shutter. It is the mysterious force that whispers that ***this*** is the instant you need to take your shot, and reveals itself only when distinctions between otherwise arbitrary perspectives vanish. The "I" is most clearly heard when the photographer is one with what is being photographed. Duality ceases.



S3-i3

Nonduality

Taoist sages and mystics throughout the ages have been telling us that there on the deepest level of reality there is fundamentally no distinction between inside and outside, self and other, or I and universe; that *duality* is illusory. The 13th Century friar, deacon and preacher, Saint Francis of Assisi, tells us that "That which you are seeking is doing the seeking." The Christian mystic and philosopher, Meister Eckhart, wrote that "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me." And the great Sufi mystic Rumi reminds us that we mistake the parts for all of creation:

"God made the illusion look real
and the real an illusion.
He concealed the sea
and made the foam visible,
the wind invisible,
and the dust manifest.
you see the dust whirling,
but how can the dust rise by itself?
you see the foam, but not the ocean."

Even modern science at times sounds eerily mystical, what with quantum mechanics telling us that we cannot decompose the world into independently existing parts; that the universe is a stupendously complex web of dynamic interrelationships between parts of the whole; and whose perception by the observer is an integral component of its reality.

> *"Science shows us that the visible world is neither matter nor spirit; the visible world is the invisible organization of energy."* – Heinz Pagels, Physicist (1939-1988)

> "The general tacit assumption in thought is that it's just telling you the way things are and that it's not doing anything – that 'you' are inside there, deciding what to do with the info. But you don't decide what to do with the info. Thought runs you... [and] gives false info that you are the one who controls thought. Whereas actually thought is the one which controls each one of us. Thought is creating divisions out of itself and then saying that they are there naturally." – David Bohm, Physicist 1917 - 1992)

> "A human being is part of the whole called by us a universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and his feelings, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us; it restricts us to our personal decisions and our affections to a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature of its beauty." – Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)

Nonduality literally means "not two," or "no separation," as in the idea that all things are interconnected and whose reality and meaning is infused with and interpenetrates the reality of all other things. Hungarian author and philosopher Arthur Koestler (1905 - 1983) perhaps put it best in his book *Janus*, where he describes the universe as consisting of a multidimensional hierarchy of *holons*, by which he meant entities that are simultaneously wholes and parts (of wholes), and which have simultaneous assertive and integrative tendencies (at all levels of the hierarchy).

> "There is no ideal in observation. When you have an ideal, you cease to observe, you are then merely approximating the present to the idea, and therefore there is duality, conflict, and all the rest of it. The mind has to be in the state when it can see, observe. The experience of the observation is really an astonishing state. In that there is no duality. The mind is simply - *aware*." – Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895 - 1986)

I offer this concept of *nonduality* here not as an introduction to some esoteric new-age philosophy, but merely as a stepping-stone toward fostering a more mindful, meditative, approach to doing photography. It is a strange – indeed, paradoxical – truth that it is in precisely those moments when we temporarily forget (or are blind to) distinctions between self and world, when we effortlessly intuit the unity between "I" (our ego) and what our "eyes" see overcomes us, and when all we feel is the pure unbridled experience of being (not labeling, not evaluating, not critiquing) – that otherwise drab and uninteresting "shots" stand a chance of being transformed into wondrous and magical *photographs*.

> "Seeing is perception with the original, unconditioned eye. It is a state of consciousness in which separation of photographer/subject, audience/image dissolves; in which a reality beyond words and concepts opens up, whose "point" or "meaning" is the direct experience itself." –John Daido Loori (1931 - 2009)

When I look at a landscape and see and *feel* nothing but trees and mountains, I will take snapshots of trees and mountains. But when I look upon the same landscape as an organic

extension of my own eyes looking back at myself, when I yield to the sublime awe I feel (as a physicist; [4] your experience will obviously vary) looking out into an unfathomably complex mystery of nature, (the potential exists for) mere pictures making way for true art. I know I am in this transcendent egoless state when "I" no longer control the camera; the picture – or, better: the essential unity of time and place, in which "I" merges with subject and the distinction between foreground and background disappears – *takes itself*. Only after the picture is taken do I realize that anything has happened at all, and I return, as it were, to my "senses."

I am far from alone from knowing that my best photographs "take themselves" (in the sense that they are captured in moments during which the ego behind the lens is least assertive). Henri Cartier-Bresson (one of the 20th Century's greatest fine-art documentarian photographers, emphasized the need to forgot oneself when taking pictures: "I find that you have to blend in like a fish in water, you have to forget yourself, you have to take your time...

> …I'm not responsible for my photographs. Photography is not documentary, but intuition, a poetic experience. It's drowning yourself, dissolving yourself, and then sniff, sniff, sniff – being sensitive to coincidence. You can't go looking for it; you can't want it, or you want get it. First you must lose yourself. Then it happens."
>
> – Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 – 2004)

S3-i4

Mindfulness, receptivity, and the "sage" photographer

So how do we attain a state of non-separateness from the world? How do we train ourselves to become mindfully receptive to what the world has to offer to us as artists and photographers? For a clue, we again reach back to Chuang Tzu's sage wisdom:

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of all true art and science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery - even if mixed with fear - that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity; in this sense, and, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man." – Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)

> "My connection with the body and its parts is dissolved. My perceptive organs are discarded. Thus leaving my material form and bidding farewell to my knowledge, I become one with the Great Pervader. This I call sitting and forgetting all things."

The book *Tao of Photography*[5] (which I strongly urge all artists, not just photographers, to read for its profound insights into the creative process) identifies nine characteristics of sagehood scattered throughout Chuang Tzu's writings, and discusses the (almost self-evident) applicability of each to the process of doing photography. The first characteristic is what we have been discussing so far, *freedom from the self.* The remaining eight, all equally important, offer additional insights into how a photographer can enhance her vision and art. Think of each of these characteristics as daily practices that help liberate the mind and soul from a constricted awareness:[6]

1. *Receptivity:* closely related to freedom from self, the photographer is fully receptive to what the world has to offer to capture when the sense of self, the ego, is minimized, or absent altogether. We enhance our receptivity by unshackling ourselves from self-imposed constraints of discrimination (between subject and object) and judgement; when we are as free from expectations, premeditated ideas, and visions of recognition (by others) of our work as possible. Being receptive means being fully present and immersed in the moment.

2. *Wu-wei:* which is variously translated to mean "inaction," "not forcing," or "doing nothing," is best described by philosopher Alan Watts (1915 - 1973) as:

   > "…the life-style of one who follows the Tao, and must be understood primarily as a form of intelligence—that is, of knowing the principles, structures, and trends of human and natural affairs so well that one uses the least amount of energy in dealing with them."

   The basic idea being that the photographer who engages in *wu-wei* is concerned with *nothing at all* beyond the unconscious, intuitive act of doing photography. Gross and Shapiro (the authors of the *Tao of Photography*) cite the example of Edward Weston comparing how he "does" photography (in *wu-wei* fashion, though Weston does not use the term) to how one drives a car; i.e., on automatic, without thinking, because

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[5] Philippe L. Gross and S. I. Shapiro, *Tao of Photography*, Ten Speed Press, 2011. The nine characteristics of sagehood discussed here are summarized from the material that appears on pages 12-58.

[6] For Chuang Tzu, a sage is one who harmonizes what he calls *little understanding* and *great understanding* ("Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy."): "In being one, [the sage] was acting as a companion of Heaven. In not being one, he was acting as a companion of man. When man and Heaven do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the True Man." In photography, "little understanding" can be likened to technique, rules of composition, and control over subject matter. Great understanding refers to the photographer's ability to react spontaneously, nonjudgmentally, and holistically to scenes as individual moments unfold, subjects come and go, and light changes. The "sage photographer" is able to seamlessly and unconsciously blend these two understandings. She is as effortlessly unencumbered by the (technically vital) minutiae of focal lengths and exposures, as her mind remains unfettered in even the most trying of circumstances and rapidly changing moods and environments while doing photography.

everything that is needed has been enfolded (through years of training!) into what manifests as an effortless creative effort. The paradox (which seems always to lurk in the background of Tao and Zen inspired wisdom) is that *wu-wei*'s apparent purposelessness actually has a clear purpose; namely, to never let purpose get in the way of whatever goal is being sought. Receptivity, insofar as it is brought about by the practice of *wu-wei*, is emphatically not a merely passive state of mind. Quite the contrary, receptivity is a state of *relaxed alertness* in which the sage (or sage photographer) remains continuously attuned to the vagaries of chance, circumstance, and ever changing processes of life. The sage photographer acts effortlessly in tune with the flow of nature.

3. *Spontaneity:* most photographers intuit, sooner or later, that spontaneity is an essential attribute of what photography is all about. It is only when we are able to react instinctively, adaptively, and in tune with what is happening around us that we stand a chance of capturing that process on film (or digital sensor). What is less well appreciated, though obvious in hindsight, is that spontaneity naturally arises when one forgets oneself. There is really nothing special to "focus" on to achieve it, so long as whatever you do (we will provide some practical advice in a few pages) brings you closer to forgetting who "you" (the "I") is. In a deepest sense, Chuang Tzu's list of "sage characteristics" (which, remember, is a conscious extraction from a text that does not explicitly tag any of them), is

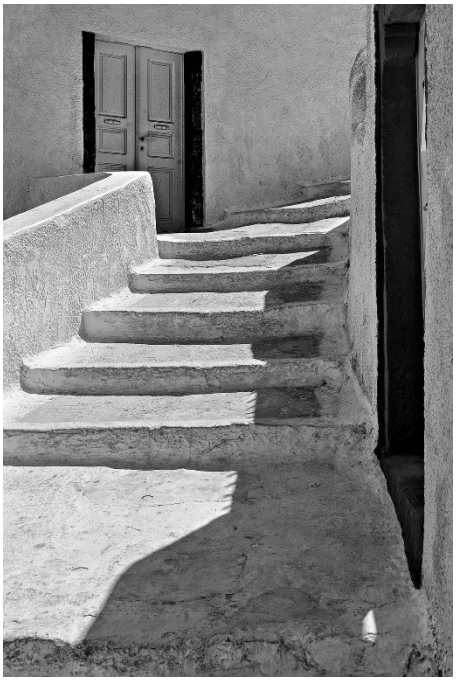
4. *Nonattachment:* only when the sage photographer is nonattached to things or events is she free to fully embrace the unfolding dynamic web of nature's processes. Unaffected by preconceived notions, expectations, or biases, the sage photographer "sees" – *intuits* – the collective unity of everything in the environment. Derek Doeffinger, in his (sadly, long out of print) *The Art of Seeing*,[7] makes an eloquent plea for nonattachment:

   > "Don't try to subdue a subject to your way of thinking-you can't push a piano through a porthole. Go with the flow. Be flexible. Adapt. The scene will not adapt to you, as you'll discover when viewing your pictures... Don't let your expectations project mirages that leave you thirsting. Release expectations. Defy assumptions. Unite with the scene to see not what you want to see, but what's there. Then strengthen the strong points to build the photograph you want. Sometimes a situation will prove to be unphotogenic. Recognize when that happens and be on your merry way looking for something else."

   The idea of nonattachment applies equally to the aesthetic expectations, previsualized images, and even the process of picture taking as it does to the environment. Just as a myopic adherence to habitual ways of "seeing" does little to foster creativity, so too does an unnecessary attachment to a "missed shot" or a lament over the undesired lighting conditions only lead to even more missed shots and a general disconnect from the organic flow of the "moment" that is such a crucial nutrient for the creative process.

[7] Derek Doeffinger, *The Art of Seeing*, Kodak Workshop Series, Eastman Kodak Co, 1992.

5. *Acceptance:* by sincerely and uncritically embracing all that a given moment presents, the sage photographer can react spontaneously to magical events that otherwise would be invisible. A photographer who only likes to work in certain conditions, and who only grudgingly (if at all!) goes out when the wind is strong or the light "bad," prevents herself from experiencing the full richness of aesthetic possibilities. Henri Cartier-Bresson equates (Taoist-like) acceptance as an affirmation of life itself: "Photography is like that. It's 'yes, yes, yes.' ... It's a tremendous enjoyment to say, 'yes!' Even if it's something you hate-'yes!' It's an affirmation. Yes!" I am embarrassed to say that acceptance is a lesson I had to *relearn* in 2008 when, during a summer trip my wife and I took to Santorini Greece (a place that is not known for the cloudy weather I mostly prefer to shoot in), I grew despondent over the brilliant sun-filled days and overly harsh shadows. It was only after I "accepted" the reality of my situation and what Santorini is – *an extraordinarily beautiful island whose summer days are filled with harsh shadows* – that I was able to embrace what I initially perceived as an impediment and view it instead as a gift. It was during that trip that I finally "saw" shadows as organic parts of compositions.



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6. *Resourcefulness:* the ability (and concomitant comfort level) to go beyond expectation, convention and instinct, the capacity to apprehend the world in new ways, to do something that seems (and what other people tell you is) wrong but *feels* right, make it possible for the sage photographer to "see" things invisible to others. On the simplest level, the idea of resourcefulness harks back to our discussion (in session 2) of Galen Rowell's form of "participatory photography." You may recall that – while having lunch with a group of workshop students in Tibet – the conditions were suddenly ripe for a rainbow to form (but where?). The only photographer in the group

that was resourceful enough to get the shot of a rainbow piercing through the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace in the valley below was Rowell! He was the only one who spontaneously threw down his lunch, raced for where he anticipated the rainbow to form, and took the shot.

7. *Te* (virtue/power): typically translated from Taoist literature as "virtue" or "inner power," *Te* is perhaps the most elusive of Chaung Tzu's sage characteristics. For out purposes, it is meant to convey the idea of an ability engaged with merit, or a skill applied with integrity. It is not power, per se, invoked because it can be, or for no particular purpose; rather, it is an authentic (from the standpoint of our essential self), mindful application of one's will (made manifest in power, strength, or action) when necessary and for precisely the right reason. *The Historical Dictionary of Taoism* (Scarecrow Press, 1998) translates *Te* as "the inner and outer power bestowed on each being by Tao, or all the qualities for action inherent in the nature of each being, which gives each being a way to maintain itself, to grow and flourish." Essentially, it is the capacity for spontaneous, effortless wisdom. You know you have experienced *Te* when whatever it is that you were attempting to "do" has already been *done* (not by you, consciously, but by your "sage photographer" self); you did what needed doing, but recall only that it was done, not how or even when. George DeWolfe,[8] a profoundly gifted photographer with an equally deep penchant for mystical musing, likens experiencing *Te* to feeling the raw emotion of capturing a particularly meaningful image:

   "The emotion is one of great humility – and great interior power, of being one with the world. It is an encounter of the immediacy of visual perception and the quiet serenity of a calm and aware mind. As I become older I am aware that this feeling is similar to the rustling of leaves on a fall day. Amidst this grace of the fall of leaves is a hesitancy present on the fringes of awareness."

8. *Free and easy wandering:* this last of Chuang Tzu's sage characteristics is reminiscent of the idea of "sauntering" (introduced in session 2), which, recall, refers to a walk in a state of relaxed attentiveness; with no particular purpose in mind other than just being open to whatever catches one's attention. Chuang Tzu would have been at home with sauntering: "Embody to the fullest what has no end and wander where there is no trail." Although "free and easy wandering" applies equally to all types of photography, it best describes the practice of so-called street photographers, who saunter their way through life, open to all that comes their way, ready to strike when a special moment presents itself.

   Some of the most creative and spontaneous photographers in history – Diane Arbus (1923-1971), Edouard Boubat (1923-1999), Andre Kertesz (1894-1985), Robert Doisneau (1912-1994), Elliott Erwitt (1928-), Walker Evans (1903-1975), Josef Koudelka (1938-), Vivian Maier (1926-2009), Eugene Smith (1918-1978), Garry

[8] http://www.georgedewolfe.com/

Winogrand (1928–1984), and, of course, Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) – all display the relaxed awareness and purposeless wandering of the sage photographer.

> "The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur[9] finds the world "picturesque." – Susan Sontag (1933 - 2004)

The point of introducing you to Chuang Tzu and these characteristics of sagehood (and to *Zazen*, to which we will turn in a moment) is certainly not to convert you to Tao, Zen, or to pave the road for you all to become "sages." Rather, it is to illustrate how these basic principles can be used as guides for cultivating a simple, mindful – yes, more *sagelike* – approach to photography; one infused with a spiritual dimension whose gentle presence is critical for fostering creativity and photographic artistry. For our purposes in this workshop, Chuang Tzu's principles may be summarized by this one essential core idea; namely, that if we recognize (and fully appreciate the fact that) the most creative and meaningful photography happens in a *split second* – we see something (regardless of how long it may have taken us to get to where we are "looking" and/or setting up our equipment), and we go *click!* – it behooves us to cultivate as clear and receptive inner state of mind as possible. Aspiring to adhere to Chuang Tzu's principles is a good place to start. It is no accident that Henri Cartier-Bresson stressed the "decisive moment" in photography:

> "Photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."[10]

And credited his Zen-like approach to photography while seizing the decisive moment when it came to reading Eugene Herrigel's classic work on Eastern philosophy, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Vintage Books, first published in the 1950s and re-issued in 1999):

> "Bow, arrow, goal and ego, all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For as soon as I take the bow and shoot, everything becomes so clear and straightforward and so ridiculously simple…"

- **Exercise S3-1: *Decisive Moment***

Watch this (20 min long *YouTube* video) on Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyhMqDfmG9o

This wonderful video shows you how this great "photographic sage" artist went about doing photography. It also exposes you to many of the key principles that have thus far been presented only in an abstract fashion. Cartier-Bresson did not just understand these principles, he was their living manifest form!

[9] The French word "flâneur" means "to stroll, loaf, saunter."

[10] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*, Aperture, 2005.

S3-i6

From *Zazen* to *Kinhin*:: *quieting the mind so the eye/I can see*

> "Meditation reveals that the obvious place to begin is not in some other place, it's right here." – Angel Kyodo Williams (1969 -)

So, having identified Chaung Tzu's nine characteristics of sagehood, and persuading you that the "sage photographer" needs to cultivate a quiet, meditative, and receptive inner state of mind in order to do photography, the question remains, *"How does one get into a mindful state?"* One answer is *Zazen*.

Zazen – which is but one aspect of Zen (though all are equivalent, and none prescriptive; the meaning of that will become somewhat clear during the ensuing discussion) – is *sitting* Zen. There is laughing Zen, crying Zen, working Zen, among a host of other "Zens." A form of walking Zen – or, more precisely, "walking meditation" (called *Kinhin*) is what I equate with doing photography after first clearing your mind through Zazen.

Zazen is, simply, the practice of clearing and calming your mind while seated. It involves doing nothing more than sitting (in any comfortable position that you find to be conducive to achieving a meditative state of mind) for a certain length of time – say, 15 to 20 minutes a day. It is not difficult to do this, but does take practice and a certain amount of dedication; it cannot be approached lightly. The reward, if you engage in Zazen as a daily ritual (try to set aside a period of "uninterrupted" time each day in the same location to habituate yourself to the practice), will be not only a generally less stressed, equilibrated, and quieter overall demeaner, but a "photographer sage"-like inner state of mind that will greatly impact your photography.

Note that while Zazen sounds easy (after all, it involves nothing but sitting!), it is not; although it becomes easier over time. The main difficulty is that it is hard to stem the incessant flow of random chatter that is constantly ringing in our heads; chatter that fills our minds with

random thoughts, memories, musings, self-reflections, rapprochements, aspirations, etc. Try this, right now, as a mini exercise: *think of nothing at all for 30 seconds*. Assume a comfortable position in a chair or on the floor (one that you can both hold with little or no discomfort for 15 or 20 minutes; a small mediation pillow – or *zafu* – may help, and in which you can sit with your spine erect, as otherwise you may feel the compulsion to doze off;-), close your eyes, take a few deep, even, breaths, exhaling in and out through your nose (the mouth is closed while doing Zazen), and quiet your mind for 30 seconds. That's it. But as soon as you sense a thought – *any* thought, wondering about the point of this exercise, what any of this has to do with photography, anything at all – restart the clock and begin again. Not so easy, right? If you are anything like me, it may take a while before you can sit for even a few seconds, much less 30 seconds! Don't despair, the quiet will come; but it *will* take some practice. Remember that the Buddha attained enlightenment while practicing Zazen, and that there are good reasons why Zazen has been followed for over twenty five hundred years!

There are numerous little details that I'm leaving out that can help ease someone who has never done Zazen into the practice; e.g., how to assume the best body posture, the need to center the spine, the most comfortable positions for your hands. The most important (and all that matters for this first exercise for those of you who never done this before) is *breath*; breath is the key to Zazen. If your mind is agitated, your breath will be agitated. As your breath assumes a natural quiet rhythm, your mind will follow. Relax your abdominal muscles and use the lower part of your stomach as though it was a bellows, expanding as you inhale, and contracting as you exhale. Do not force your belly to move – deep breathing is not something to be willed; rather, let a natural rhythm establish itself (in the way infants breathe when in a tranquil mood). Counting can help your breathing. Count "one" while first inhaling, and "two" when exhaling, and repeat until you reach 10. Then go back to one and start again. As you do this, and as you notice a thought intruding on your breathing, acknowledge it gently, without judging, reacting, or chasing it, then let it go; return to the count of "one." Do not suppress these thoughts or whatever emotions you may sense bubbling up. This will happen regularly and is a natural part of being conscious beings. The idea behind Zazen is not to teach you eliminate the random chatter in your head; rather, it is to teach you to control it, to step away from it, to rise above it. In the beginning of your practice it will be hard to even get part way to 10 before being distracted by stray thoughts. With practice, you will be able to get to "10" and beyond with little effort. Eventually, you will do away with counting altogether and simply follow your own breath. You will *be* your breath. This will be a signpost alerting you that you're a step away from *samadhi*, a state of being in which our mind's penchant for analyzing, categorizing, labeling, and separating inner and outer realities *ceases*. If you are able to take a semblance of this state into the world, once you get out of your chair or lotus position (or whatever posture you've assumed while doing Zazen), camera in hand, you've prepared yourself for Kinhin – *walking meditation*. Which is what (for me, at least) is what "cultivating simplicity in photography" is all about.

The workshop webpage provide links some online sources you may wish to consult, but the best place to start is with an instructional / inspirational video (a link to which is provided in

exercise S3-2 below) by Zen Buddhist rōshi – i.e., a spiritual leader – John Daido Loori (1931 - 2009).[11]

Recall my brief introduction to Loori in session 1. Trained originally as a chemist, Loori came to study photography after attending a workshop in 1971 given by photographer Minor White, around which time (under White's influence), he also began studying Zen. Over the years, he became a master photographer as well, and his body of work is well worth looking up and studying.

A short aside on artists whose works touch us deeply

Loori is but one of a long line of extraordinary human beings whose thoughts and art have inspired me deeply over the years (all of the books of his that I own are dogeared beyond repair), humbled me profoundly, and about whom I carry the burden of sadness over never had an opportunity to meet in person. We all have such lists of course, and I think it is important to occasionally reflect on what it is about someone else's life's work that touches us so. The private lessons inevitably drawn from such occasional reflections echo one of the main themes I've tried to impart in this workshop; namely, that what we see out there in the world is both a reflection of what is inside of us, and a map of what we are evolving to (as spiritual beings). We "see" what we are, and by reflecting on what we *do* (and train our lenses on) we learn who we are. In the same way, we discover truths about ourselves by reflecting on *who* and *what* touches us in the deepest ways, emotionally, creatively, and spiritually. In my own case, and as far as photographers go, Loori is in a select group that also includes Ansel Adams, Minor White, Carl Chiarenza, Brett Weston, and Wynn Bullock.

- **Exercise S3-2: *Zazen***

Watch John Daido Loori's *YouTube* video, "Introduction to Zen Meditation: The Still Point," that was filmed a year before his death in 2008:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9b4FbGlVSE

The video is 10 minutes long, and is among the very best introductions to *Zazen* that I have seen. It is certainly the place to start your practice, and – I hope you agree after viewing it the first time – welcomes repeated viewing. An additional resource that I urge all of you to at least look at is Loori's book, *Finding the Still Point: A Beginner's Guide to Zen meditation*. It is more of a booklet (barely 100 pages long and measuring 7-by-7 inch in size) and is accompanied both by a CD that contains a 10 minute and 30 minute time Zazen sessions (along with guidance provided by Loori himself), and a small selection of Loori's own Zen-inspired images. As of this writing (10 Aug, 2017) the hardcover is available for $8 and change on Amazon, which is a steal.

[11] *Obituary:* http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/10/nyregion/10loori.html

S3-i7

Experiential *Flow* in Photography

A set of guiding principles that are related everything we have been discussing thus far (Chuang Tzu's characteristics of the "photographic sage," the need to cultivate a quiet, mindful, receptive state, and practicing Zazen), but less overtly "mystical," derives from a body of work centered on the notion of *experiential flow* (that can be thought of as an alternative – Westernized version – of the Taoist concept of *Te*, discussed above, along with a set of practical instructions on how to achieve it).

The word "flow" and the body of work I am referring to here has been developed over the last few decades by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, director of the *Quality of Life Research Center* at the *Drucker School of Claremon Graduate University*, and author of (among many other books), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. In this book (and in his multi-decade long examination of the subject), Csíkszentmihályi describes the *supra*-conscious state (sometimes called the "groove" by musicians, or the "zone" by basketball players) that people "awaken" to and experience when completely absorbed and immersed in an activity. For me, of course, that activity is doing photography.

My best moments as an artist – as a human being – are those when I entirely lose a sense of self. Emphatically, I do not mean for you to interpret this as a poetic metaphor. I mean this literally. If I come home from a day's worth of a photo-safari, armed with 10 or more GBs of RAW files, and know that I was totally aware of what I was doing the entire time (consciously thinking of f-stops, filters, and compositions), I will also know that there will be little chance of finding any soulful art in that huge digital pile. *I was not in the flow*. On the other hand, if I go out for a walk with my dog and camera, and come back with but one shot of I know not what because my mind was lost while I was taking it, I stand a good chance of savoring that precious gem of an image that is likely to emerge on my computer screen. Not always, of course, but the chances are usually good, if I lost myself in the process of capture.

This experience, and my interpretation of it, is far from unique. It is experienced by everyone, at some point in time, though not everyone is always attuned to when (or why and how) it happens, nor appreciates what needs to be done to maximize the chances of it happening again. This is where Csíkszentmihályi's books come in handy, as they describe the nature of this experiential flow; how it comes about, what the tell-tale signs are, and how one might better prepare for the "ride."

S3-i8

Csíkszentmihályi identifies eight conditions, or dimensions, of the flow experience: (1) clear goals every step of the way; (2) immediate feedback to one's action; (3) balance between challenges and skills; (4) focused concentration; (5) sense of potential control; (6) loss of self-consciousness; (7) time distortion; and (8) autotelic or self-rewarding experience. Critically, in order to maximize the potential for experiencing flow, one must eliminate (as much as possible) any anxiety or boredom, and strike a delicate (and typically dynamic) balance between the challenge of the activity and the available skills that one brings to bear on the required tasks. The purest, deepest, states of flow are achieved when one is able to apply a maximal skill set (which can itself, of course, be achieved only through long study and practice; i.e., a total immersion to craft) to the most highly challenging activity. This is rare, but is a spiritual prize well worth pursuing. Among the several wonderful quotes that Csíkszentmihályi includes in his University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center presentation (see link on workshop website) are these three: one from an anonymous rock climber...

> *"You're so involved in what you're doing, you aren't thinking about yourself as separate from the immediate activity. You're no longer a participant observer, only a participant. You're moving in harmony with something else you're part of."*

...one from a surgeon:

> *"You are not aware of the body except your hands...not aware of self or personal problems….If involved, you are not aware of aching feet, not aware of self."*

...and one from poet Mark Strand:

> *"You're right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you're completely enraptured, you're completely caught up in what you're doing…. there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're making meaning…"*

These sentiments pretty much express my own experience of flow in photography. When in the flow, I do not know my name, I do not know where I am except for the "feel" of my immediate surroundings, I do not reflect on my problems or station in life, I do not worry about what "I need to do" after I've finished my photography. I am one with my camera, I am

one with what my camera is pointed at, I have no conscious sense of self or awareness of being, apart from a pure primal joy in experiencing total immersion in what I am doing. I am focused, strongly and deeply, but not at all actively engaged in thinking about anything. There is no sense of time, not even as I press the shutter repeatedly or take long exposures and somehow, though only mechanically and utterly devoid of conscious reflection, tick off the required seconds. I know the flow has vanished when I hear myself ask, *"What now?"*

- **Exercise S3-3: *Csíkszentmihályi's TED talk***

Watch Csíkszentmihályi's TED talk on "Flow, the secret to happiness," that he gave in 2008:

https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow

It runs a bit less than 20 minutes, but is worth every second of your attention. It is filled with incredibly deep insights on not just what "flow" is (and articulated so much more eloquently than my short description) but gives practical advice on how to achieve it. The workshop page contains additional links to a short essay and presentation slides

S3-i9

"Before I had studied Zen for thirty years…"

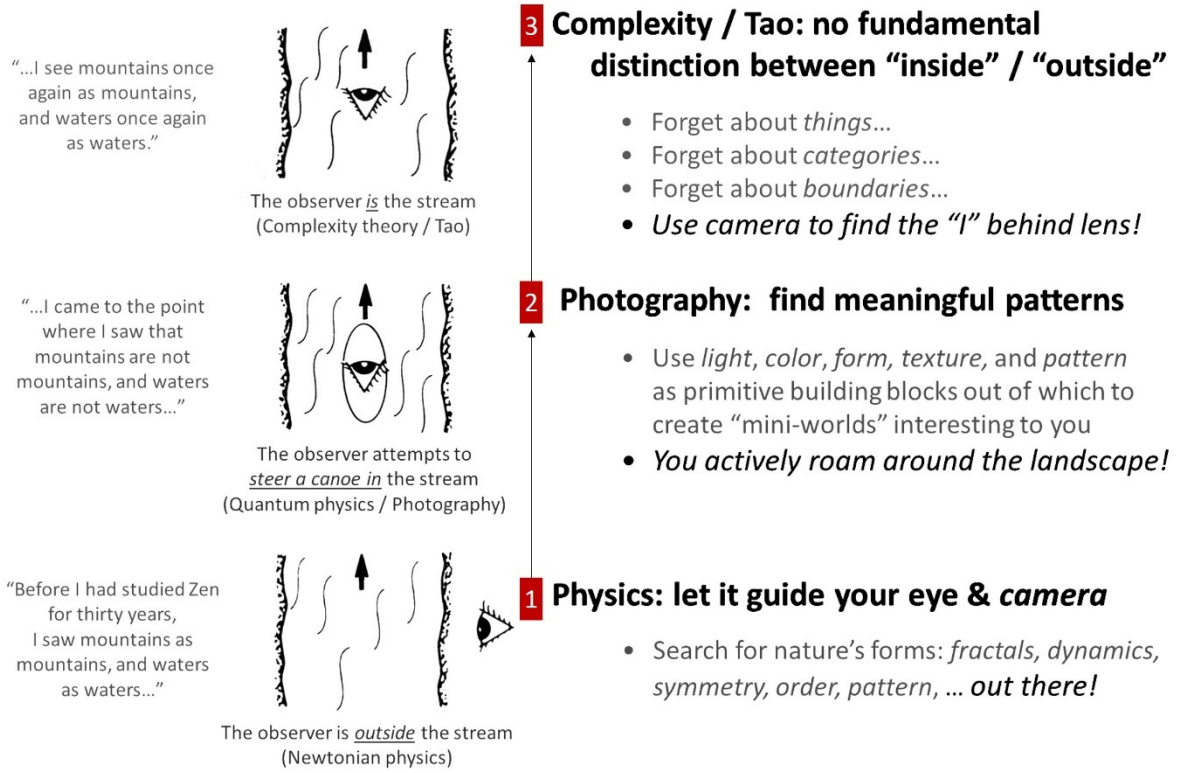
Recall this Zen poem I introduced in the opening pages of the essay for session 1:

"Before I had studied Zen for thirty years,
I saw mountains as mountains,
and waters as waters…

When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge,
I came to the point where I saw
that mountains are not mountains,
and waters are not waters.

But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest.
For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains,
and waters once again as waters."

While we will have occasion to return to it again during the final session of this workshop, I bring it to your attention here because it serves as a perfect backdrop for illustrating – and a philosophical vehicle for emphasizing – the concurrence of three key themes of this workshop: "seeing" (in general, and "seeing photographically" in particular), the nonduality of inner and outer states, and the prima facie absurdity of an "expert" on complex systems leading a workshop on "simplicity":



I will leave it to the discussion I hope this slide (indeed, entire session 3 essay) spawns on our *Facebook* workshop page to pursue the ideas behind it further. Suffice to say, that if what this slide says resonates with you, on any level, you've already sown the seeds you need to cultivate the art of simplicity in photography. Discussion awaits!

> *"One has to tiptoe lightly and steal up to one's quarry; you don't swish the water when you are fishing. I believe that, through the act of living, the discovery of oneself is made concurrently with the discovery of the world around us. A balance must be established between the two worlds - the one inside of us and the one outside of us. As a result of a constant reciprocal process, both these worlds come to form a single one. And it is this world that we must communicate."*
>
> – Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (1952)