



Part I

Experiencing Zen through Photography and Photography through Zen

The more you actively look, the more the action will become intuitive and natural, subconscious and effortless. With practice, your eye will be intuitively and subconsciously drawn to the light, and the light will be drawn to your eye.

Wayne Rowe

“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....”

Eugen Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Archery

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

D. T. Suzuki, Zen and Japanese Culture

The Essence of Zen and Satori

During the course of my college studies, I came across a Zen parable about a man who encounters a tiger in a field. The man flees, and in his efforts to escape the tiger, he lowers himself by a wild vine down the face of a cliff. Trembling, he suddenly realizes that the tiger he is fleeing from is directly above him and that another tiger is waiting below. His life now depends upon the strength of the vine. If this situation were not bad enough, two mice, one black and one white, begin to gnaw at the vine. The story ends as the man sees a luscious strawberry growing near him on the precipice. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucks the strawberry with the other. “How sweet it tasted!”

After reading this as a young student, I was certain that Zen was the philosophy for me. 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 vows 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 all about. One day it suddenly occurred to me that I had already experienced it—*unknowingly*—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—without even trying. And, at the same time, I realized that it was through the experience of Zen and satori that I was able to discover, create, and capture my best photographs. Photography and Zen had merged. They were one. I was experiencing Zen through photography and photography through Zen.



▲ "How Sweet it Tasted!"

What is Zen? What is Satori?

According to D. T. Suzuki, the legendary interpreter of Zen for the Western mind, “Zen discipline consists in attaining enlightenment (or satori)... 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”. This definition of Zen is what appealed to me in college: the idea that life is here and now and not something that we should postpone to a future date. Zen and satori represent the “in the moment” plucking and tasting of the strawberry in front of us.

Zen, Haiku, and Photography

The haiku, a short Japanese poem consisting of 17 syllables, is defined by D.T. Suzuki as “the spirit of Zen” and “a significant intuition into Reality”. R. H. Blyth defined the haiku as “the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things”. Perhaps the most famous haiku is by the Japanese poet Basho:

The old pond.

A frog jumps in—

Plop!

Through his intuition or feeling, Basho was into the moment, into its isness, its “suchness”, its spiritual rhythm. He was into Reality and was experiencing Zen and satori. Similarly, Vincent Van Gogh, possessed by the light and color of Provence, discovered the isness, the nowness, and the suchness of things: wind-whipped cypresses, wheat fields, a flowering almond tree branch. With the searing sun of southern France burning images into his brain, Van Gogh threw himself headlong into capturing the images and experienced significant intuitions into Reality as he created oil-on-canvas haikus: “It’s the only time I

feel I am alive”, he wrote to his brother Theo. Like Basho, Van Gogh experienced the spirit of Zen and satori.

By the same token, photographer Edward Weston created silver halide haikus: “To see the Thing Itself is essential: the Quintessence revealed direct...”. Like Basho and Van Gogh, Weston had significant intuitions into Reality. The photographer, like the poet and the painter and any other artist, can provoke satori or enlightenment and record it in his or her creation.

Photographer Dennis Stock illustrated eight haikus written by Basho. In each of them, there is an equivalence between Stock’s visual haiku and Basho’s verbal haiku. In one of these pairs, a lone brown-orange leaf hangs on a branch backlit by a glowing autumn sun coupled with Basho’s words: “This autumn why do I feel so old? Years roll by like clouds, swift as swallows fly!”

This pairing of a visual and a verbal haiku reminds me of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet No. 73:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love
more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave
ere long.*

What we see expressed here are three moments of satori on the subject of growing old. It doesn't matter that the forms used to express these moments are different: the haiku, the photograph, and the sonnet. What they share is their total absorption with the Now and the externalization of intuitive feelings.

One summer in southern France, as the mistral wind blew outside the house, I experienced feelings comparable to Basho's and expressed them in the following haiku:

A summer mistral:

*Sun and shadows dance;
A door slams; the cat hisses.*

Another day there, in the silence of a summer afternoon, I became aware of two distinct sounds: a rain-like murmur created by a myriad of yellow pollen bits falling from the tiny flowers of the vines covering the house; and the buzz of numberless but invisible bees at work gathering the pollen. The following haiku came to mind:

Summer ivy wall:

*Hum of the universe;
Golden rain on a roof.*

French writer, philosopher, and language expert Roland Barthes recognized the linkage between haiku and photography. Accordingly, in his book *Camera Lucida*, he undertook to define the essence of photography. He described the photographs that

“animated” him and that he in turn “animated” as consisting of two co-present elements: *studium* and *punctum*. According to Barthes, *studium* is an extension of our field of knowledge and cultural information. It is by *studium* that we take an interest in 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*, as Barthes said, “will break (or punctuate) the *studium*... the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds, are so many points”. According to Barthes, *punctum* rises out of the scene, seeks out the viewer, disturbs the *studium*, wounds, cuts, pricks, and stings the viewer. Furthermore, *punctum* has the power to expand and to provoke *satori*. The trigger that provokes *satori*, “a tiny shock”, is usually found in a detail. In Barthes' eyes, this brings certain photographs very close to the haiku.

Take a look at the photograph of James Dean by Dennis Stock, and with Roland Barthes' ideas about

► *James Dean. Times Square, New York, 1955.*
© Dennis Stock/Magnum Photos



photography in mind, “allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness”. Then, write down your personal reactions to the photograph. Write down anything that enters into your affective consciousness. If this photo animates you, you might further consider Barthes’ ideas and identify the studium and the punctum: What constitutes the studium? What constitutes the punctum? Does anything provoke satori? After you finish your own analysis, consider my interpretation below. Then follow the same procedure for the next photograph by Sebastião Salgado. Both of these photographs are iconic images and cultural points of reference.

This photograph by Dennis Stock has an existential mood and a mysterious romantic poetry. It represents a perfect interaction between the photographer, the subject, the setting, and the moment. It is, in fact, a silver halide haiku. It records satori experienced by the photographer and his subject, and it provokes satori in the viewer as well. One point of punctuation, of punctum, in this photograph—one thing that disturbs, that rises out of the scene, that seeks out the viewer, that provokes satori—is the physical attitude of James Dean: hunched and huddled, hands in pockets, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, a lone dark figure rising out of a deserted

urban landscape under the rain. He is an alienated, Hamlet-like presence who has resolved the question of whether “to be or not to be” by choosing *to be*—to be intensely aware and alive in this real moment, to feel the isness of the moment, to be in the Now, to have a significant intuition into Reality.

Study his nonverbal body attitude: the tilt of his bare head under the rain, his hunched shoulders, the intense and focused concentration in his eyes, the angle of the cigarette. All of these elements conjoin to convey the feeling of his absorption in the Moment, in the Now, in being itself, in becoming itself, in the solitary Reality of that instant. It is, as James Dean himself would have called it, a “real moment”, an instant of captured reality that pulls us into the photo and animates us.

Compositionally, the placement of the subject above and to the left of center gives an asymmetrical balance to the photograph. Dean’s head is placed at a point of intersection approximately one-third down from the top and one-third from the left side of the photograph. This is known as a Golden Mean point, and the eye is immediately drawn to it. In addition, the darker tones of the man contrast strongly with the lighter background. Behind Dean and to our left is a theater with a small crowd huddled under the

marquee, several cars, and a passerby hurrying under an umbrella. Strangely, this suggestion of public life does not alter the loneliness and isolation of the dark figure. In fact, the crowd serves as a vivid contrast to it.

To the far right are more theaters representing, perhaps, places of dreams and illusions. The crowded main street on the far left represents the ever-moving stream of conventional life. The path that the actor has taken signifies an unconventional diversion from the mainstream—the choice of a rebellious nonconformist. The cement markers along that diversion frame him perfectly and give a loose order and structure to that part of the photograph. Within that structure the subject is free to improvise, to interpret, and to give feeling and reality to the moment—much as an actor upon a stage.

To the viewer's immediate right is the ordered and patterned repetition of the solid iron fence that represents the material world as well as a barrier, separating dream from reality. With its rhythmically placed pattern of perforations, it brings to mind a strip of film where photographers and actors are able to externalize and to give concrete form to their inner dreams and visions—much as Dennis Stock and James Dean did here. Its diminishing perspective

adds to the illusion of depth already created by the high horizon line and the soft, foggy impressionism of the background buildings. Furthermore, if we compare the actual image with its reflections in the wet pavement, we see how material reality contrasts once again with illusory dream.

A photograph is a reflection of light. What we see on the pavement in front of James Dean is a reflection of a reflection—the negative of a positive. Compositionally, the positive area above the reflection occupies two-thirds of the entire frame, while the area of the reflection and the space below it account for one-third of the entire frame. This perfect division of visual elements embodies the harmony of the Golden Mean (two-thirds is to one-third as one is to two-thirds). It serves to asymmetrically balance the photo along the lines of its contrasting elements: positive versus negative, white versus black, reality versus dream, conventional versus unconventional, external versus internal, whole versus part.

Furthermore, and most importantly, we discover additional points of punctuation that surround the image reflected in the wet pavement. These erratic, vibrating, overlapping rings of punctum literally disturb, wound, and break the studium of the photograph, animating the viewer. They break and

wound both the reflected image of the subject and the emotions of the viewer. Visually, they echo Marlon Brando's observation that Dean projected "a subtle energy and an intangible injured quality". Finally, the reflected image of James Dean leaves us with a fragmented, opaque representation of an enigmatic figure whose mystery was captured in the magic of that real moment.

Now that you have read my detailed and very personal interpretation of this image, examine the image again and compare my interpretation to your own initial analysis. Consider other possibilities. What is Dean looking at off-camera? What is he doing there? Was this a moment of improvisation, or did Dennis Stock have him purposely pose for this shot? If you knew the answers to these questions, would that make any difference in your analysis? The possibilities of interpretation are endless. This is the hallmark of poetic images, of images that go beyond studium, of images with punctum: they have the power to expand and to provoke satori. By opening ourselves to the image, by allowing the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness, and by linking vision and feeling, we can make the invisible visible. We can extend the boundaries of our visual awareness through the medium of photography. We can learn *to see* and *to be* through photography.

In order for a photograph to touch him, Roland Barthes' method was "to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness". Let's apply Barthes' method to another iconic photo, this time by Sebastião Salgado. Say nothing. Listen. Let the image speak. Wait to "hear the light". What you find in the photograph depends upon what your own sensitivity, experience, field of knowledge, and cultural information bring to it. Study the image carefully and record your impressions. After you make your own analysis, consider the one I made by opening myself to the photo and letting it speak to me. Using Barthes' technique, I drew this interpretation from my own educational background and field of experience.

When I think of photographer Sebastião Salgado, what comes to mind are the words "humanitarian", "humanist", and "concerned photographer", as well as the I-Thou attitude of Martin Buber. The only other photographers whose names I associate with similar thoughts and feelings are James Nachtwey and W. Eugene Smith. This is a very rarified group of photographers.

► *Serra Pelada Gold Mine. Serra Pelada, Brazil, 1986. © Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas Images/Contact Press Images*

