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MINDFULNESS IN PHOTOGRAPHY

From the online book *Photographic Psychology: Image and Psyche* by John Suler

Half a century ago eastern philosophy began to seep into the west, bringing new insights about awareness, self, and reality. Some of these ideas had already popped up here and there among avant-garde thinkers and artists in Europe and America, but the westward spread of such systems as Buddhism and Taoism catalyzed this dawning of a new way to see and understand. One fundamental concept is what many people nowadays refer to as “mindfulness.” It’s both an attitude and process that has had a powerful effect on many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, medicine, art, and photography.

To consider what mindfulness is in photography, let’s first take a look at what it is not. You’re out on a shoot. You’re scanning the environment, looking for a good capture and trying to avoid bad ones. In the back of your mind you’re thinking about all those great photos you’ve taken in the past, or about great images by others. You consider ways to recreate your prior success or emulate those outstanding pictures by your heroes. You’re reminding yourself of the techniques and strategies for shooting. You’re thinking about the people who will see your work. Will they like it? You anticipate their reactions. Some recognition and praise would sure feel nice. Maybe these pictures will turn out to be crap. How disappointing would that be? You’re wanting and hoping that this will be a successful shoot. You expect at least a few good photos.

I’m sure we’ve all found ourselves living out at these some aspects of this scenario. But what’s wrong with this picture? What’s wrong is that we’re not really *seeing*. Our awareness is constricted by what we’re thinking, expecting, and wanting. The internal chatter and emotional desires act like smoke that clouds our vision. We’re experiencing all the stuff going on inside our heads and not much of what’s going on around us.

Even though they may not specifically use the word “mindfulness,” many of the great masters talk about photography as awareness of the present moment in which we forget ourselves. We let go of the goals, desires, expectations, techniques, and anxieties that make up who we in order to more fully immerse ourselves into the

experience of seeing. We open up our receptive awareness to what the world offers us. Rather than being some objective observer trying to capture something, we become the being that is in communion with the environment, that is *in* the world. We're not looking for anything in particular. We're not going anywhere in particular. We're not expecting or trying to control anything in particular. Instead, we're wandering, perhaps rather aimlessly, without a goal or purpose. We're fully and naively open to the possibility of the unexpected, the unique, the moment when things come together... to the flow of life. Under these conditions, when we let go of the self, "it" appears to us. We don't find and take the picture. The photograph finds us. It takes itself. We unite with the scene not so we can see a shot we want, but rather what the scene offers. The experience comes to us and the photograph is simply the icing on the cake (Figure 8.12).

In Buddhism mindfulness is associated with the word "sati, "one translation of which is "remembering." We remember the pure, simple, bare awareness we once knew as a child. Have you ever seen an infant staring, with fascination and delight, at a simple object, like a spoon? The baby isn't thinking about or expecting anything from the spoon. She's simply immersed in the joyful experience of it, without any of the psychological and emotional filters that distort our adult perceptions of the world. She doesn't even yet have the concept of "spoon" to get in the way. As Monet said, "to see we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at." Photographers will similarly talk about the childlike excitement of wandering through a forest, a junkyard, or an old abandoned house, seeing visual enchantment everywhere. In these situations, when mindfulness blossoms, even the very basic, routine mental mechanisms that filter out unnecessary stimulation and efficiently guide us through everyday living undergo "deautomatization." It's a fancy psychological term, but it simply means that we see things we would otherwise ignore because they seem irrelevant to the task at hand. We see things not in terms of their utility or practical, abstract, or even personal meaning. We don't even see them in terms of color, tones, shapes, textures, or other visual concepts. We simply see them for what they are. Shunryu Suzuki, a famous Zen teacher, spoke of the expert's mind that fails to recognize anything beyond his learned theories. It is the "beginner's mind"—the fresh, uncluttered baby's mind—that realizes the possibilities the expert cannot. The famous western psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion might add, we learn to see "without memory or desire."

In photography, mindfulness is like observing something for the first time, even though you may have looked at it a thousand times before. For example, when you've been away from home for a long period, and then, upon returning, you suddenly notice things to which you had become so accustomed that your eye failed to even register them any more—the decorations on the walls, the color of the rug, the view out the window. It's like that moment when you look at a family member or close friend and suddenly realize that you are truly *seeing* them, as if for the first time, and not just looking numbly at them, as you usually do. Mindfulness is a deep kind of knowing.



Figure 8.12 “Mindfulness” by John Suler

Stéphane Barbery, a French photographer living in Kyoto, whose photographs capture the *mono no aware* and *hors-temp* aspects of reality according to Japanese philosophy, has emphasized photography as a process of “welcoming” soul, world, and beauty. This is a poetic way of thinking about mindfulness in photography. It is a state of mind that is welcoming, receptive, and opening up to the beautiful visual possibilities within the world, as well as to the many dimensions of our mind and soul that enables us to see those possibilities.

Cultivating mindfulness involves “letting go.” Let go of expectations, straining, and rushing. Chuang-Tzu said that “great understanding is broad and unhurried, little understanding is cramped and busy.” It’s a matter of learning how to wait. Let go of blocked emotions, because receptiveness to all feelings and sensations allows the eyes to open. Let go of forcing a shot if it’s simply not working out—just move on. Let go of thinking, trying to figure things out, and clinging to or rejecting anything.

Accept whatever comes, good or bad. Let go of perfectionism, evaluating yourself, and comparing yourself to others. Be patient with and accept who you are, regardless of your photographic or personal shortcomings. Let go of things that seem to be problems. Resisting only adds energy to them. Instead, embrace them as an opportunity. There is no such thing as “bad” light, subjects, weather, or techniques for shooting. Investigate, explore, experiment with what you see around you. Mindful photography is a “yes” experience in which all aspects of life are affirmed as potential subjects. And after you’ve taken that great shot, linger on the scene for a moment, to appreciate it fully for what it is. Let go of treating the world as visual fodder for your photographic trophies.?

How to Cultivate Mindfulness

I know I’m a bit guilty in waxing the poetic in what I’ve said so far about mindfulness. The concept can become rather philosophical and mystical. So now let’s get more practical. How exactly can we cultivate this state of awareness?

Well, here’s one way for sure: learn mindfulness meditation. You’ll find lots of how-to books and information online about it. It’s not as weird, fuzzy-brained, or touchy-feely as you might think. Not at all. Westerners have all sorts of misconceptions about meditation. Mindfulness meditation, in fact, is a very learnable, practical skill. I’ll offer a heads-up, though: it will be a challenge, because meditation requires practice and dedication. It will reveal who you are as a person, including your problems—problems that no doubt affect your photography. If you stick with it, the reward will be a big improvement not just in your photography, but in your mental and physical well-being. If you still have any doubts about the effectiveness of this form of meditation, consider the fact that Easterners have been doing it for thousands of years as a way to refine their skills in painting, calligraphy, sculpting, archery, and all forms of martial arts.

Of course, you don’t *have* to become a meditator to develop mindfulness. You can cultivate this state of awareness during almost any activity that you might not have thought of as “contemplative.” When you’re eating, walking, driving, showering, washing dishes, whatever—simply be aware of your surroundings. Seemingly boring, mundane things can appear new and fascinating. Notice the light, shadows, colors, textures, and patterns, even if and especially if you don’t have your camera. Taking a shot doesn’t matter right now. In fact, it could get in the way of mindfulness, especially if you tend to hide behind the camera rather than immerse yourself into the scene, or if you think of the camera as a tool of power, control, purpose, and accomplishment. During these everyday activities, just notice and appreciate how light works, without any other thought or expectation that might get in the way of that clear perception. Developing mindfulness can be that simple.

Meditation teachers have outlined some of the qualities of mindfulness to help meditators recognize it when it happens. The list is very useful for us photographers as well, when we’re doing photography or simply cultivating that state of awareness during everyday activities. Mindfulness is:

- Light, clear, easy, energetic (rather than heavy, ponderous, narrow, picky)
- Reflective, like a mirror or a lake that simply reflects the sky and landscape around it without analyzing or evaluating
- Accepting, without judgment or criticism
- Non-conceptual awareness, without categorizing, labeling, comparing, contrasting
- Pre-verbal awareness, because words and talking are not necessary
- Present-time, “here and now” awareness, and not about the future or past
- Awareness of the flow of life and how everything changes
- Non-egotistic awareness, it’s not about “I, me, mine”... It’s not “I see and take a picture of a flower” but rather simply “flower!”

Some people recommend taking and looking at lots of photographs in order to widen your vision of what photography can be, to develop a heightened sensitivity for recognizing visual possibilities that can be captured with your camera. Without a doubt, mindfulness will draw on your continually expanding reservoir of visual memories. When you’re shooting, mindfulness will help you open up to all the possibilities you have seen in your mind’s eye. But mindfulness also goes deeper than memory and learned perceptions. In its purest form, it is seeing like you’ve never seen before. As Bion suggested, you leave memory behind and enter a new, creative territory for observing the world around you.

In his book on mindfulness meditation, Henepola Gunaratana talks about how it is actually a combination of mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness is a process of opening up and detecting something new, like highly sensitive peripheral vision. Concentration, on the other hand, is a one-pointed awareness that zooms into focus on an object, like a laser. In photography as well meditation, the two work as partners to balance each other. In the state of mindful awareness, you notice something in your field of view. Then, using the powers of concentration, you consciously direct your awareness to it, sink into and explore it, and finally, when doing photography, record it without memory or desire—not unlike the archer who selflessly lets loose the arrow in that fully focused moment of Zen awareness. Once the photo is taken, your mindfulness opens up again to notice something different. During the shoot, the process repeats itself over and over again, with mindfulness providing receptivity to the “big picture” of new visual possibilities, while concentration guides the immersion into the selected subject, culminating in the photograph. Mindfulness is inclusive, concentration is exclusive. If you find yourself being overwhelmed by visual sensations—that is, too much mindfulness, which can happen to people with acute visual sensitivities—try boosting concentration. If you find yourself slipping into a stupor-like focus on one thing, try returning to mindfulness.

Photographers who practice mindfulness sometimes say that simply holding a camera can induce this state of awareness. It is a kind of conditioning effect: your mind associates doing photography with mindfulness. I might add that when we are mindfully aware of our surroundings, we are doing photography, even if we don’t have a camera with us.