

# The Way of Photography

A Path of Knowledge  
Through Visual Perception

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Translated by Marcela López

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## **Dedication**

To the teachers that I never met in person,  
Minor White and Chögyam Trungpa,  
with my gratitude for pointing out  
the Way of Photography.

# Contents

Introduction .....	9
Photography, a Path .....	11
Photographic Lineages .....	14
Minor White's Legacy .....	16
Miksang Teachings .....	18
Looking and Seeing .....	20
Photographic Training .....	23
Without Words .....	25
A Simple Exercise .....	26
The World of Experience .....	28
The Innocence of the Gaze .....	30
The Ordinary .....	32
Art without a Purpose .....	33
Becoming a Channel .....	35
A Transmission .....	38
State of Expanded Awareness .....	41
The Camera Serves to See .....	43
The Eye of the Machine .....	45
Photographic Presence .....	47
Witness and Testimony .....	49
The Power of Attention .....	51
The Right Attitude .....	53
Obstacles to Perception .....	55
Inner Stillness .....	57
Discipline .....	59
Acknowledging Our Limits .....	61
The Spark of Inspiration .....	63
Exploring Intuition .....	65

Passion and Obsession .....	67
Technical Simplicity .....	69
Types of Cameras: Ways of Looking .....	71
Reframing .....	73
The Need to Unlearn .....	75
The Great Deception .....	77
A Photograph Explains Nothing .....	79
Beauty and Aesthetics .....	81
Background and Figure .....	83
Elements of Perception .....	85
Behind the Color .....	87
In the Presence of Light .....	90
Texture: Fingers in the Eyes .....	93
Pattern: The Structure of the Image .....	95
The Still Moment .....	97
The Basic Form of Perception .....	99
Dot in Space: The Key .....	101
Space: Resting the Eyes .....	103
Abstract Photography .....	105
The Message is in the Form .....	108
Light and Shadow .....	110
The Flow of Time .....	112
Impermanence .....	114
A Visual Stage Play .....	116
Mirror and Window .....	118
The Objective and the Subjective .....	119
Ordinary Symbols .....	121
The Equivalent .....	123
Recognizing Visual Experience .....	125
Cloud Photographs .....	126
Essence of a Boat .....	129

Fete Foraine .....	131
Allie Mae Burroughs .....	133
Migrant Mother .....	135
Movie Premiere .....	137
Stray Dog .....	139
Metal Ornament .....	141
And the Photographs to be Looked at .....	143
Natural Style .....	146
The Critical Mind .....	148
Editing is an Art .....	150
Without Pictorialism .....	152
Series: Connection Between Photographs .....	155
Sequences .....	157
Transcending Separation .....	159
The Inexplicable .....	163
Bibliography .....	164
Photobiography .....	166
Acknowledgements .....	168
Information and Contact .....	169

# Introduction

The photographic act consists of two parts: the moment when the photograph is taken and the moment when it is looked at. The first one is exclusive to the photographer, while the second one involves anyone who observes those images. In both cases, the basis is visual perception, which is related to the way that the photographer sees the world and how he connects with it. The image obtained becomes the means through which he shares his experience with others.

Similar to a vast underground river, the knowledge provided by photography flows throughout its history. It is not an intellectual, theoretical, and abstract knowledge, but rather the fruit of direct experience. Each one of the styles and movements that photographers have followed highlights specific aspects of that knowledge. They are the expression of their time and the personal concerns of the photographers who have practiced them. No style is more valid than another, but rather they constitute different approaches to the photographic act.

The experience gained by visiting new territories produces knowledge. We do not decide our destination; it is our passion for photography that takes us where it wants. Staying for too long in the same place is not convenient, even if it provides us with a sense of security. If we have never exhibited our photographs, it is worth daring and take the risk to show them to others. Exhibiting them can lead us to experience emotions that we did not know. To exhibit is to expose oneself, not only to our friends' criticism and envy, but also to the praise and the pride that comes with it. These are just stages of a great journey of knowledge.

To make this journey, we do not need to carry too much luggage. Along the way, we leave behind many things that become useless. At the beginning, it is very common for us to worry excessively about mastering the technique, believing that it is the key to become a great photographer. This is necessary only until we can use it without paying too much attention to it. Practice itself leads us to let go of that weight, and thus we begin to feel lighter.

In the following pages you will find an outline of the journey that I hope will serve as a guide. These are mere indications, since only you can draw the map. The photographic path will reveal itself as you traverse it. Each stage naturally leads to the next once the previous one has been completed. Where would the excitement of the journey be if we already knew the destination?

This book aspires to become a source of inspiration rather than an instruction manual. Do not try to understand everything that is explained in it, because, as Minor White stated, *“The experience of knowledge cannot be expressed in words”*. It would be more interesting if reading it prompts you to ask questions and the quality of your photographs would be the answer. If this text succeeds in motivating you to deepen your photographic practice, it will have fulfilled its purpose.



## Photography, a Path

The various lineages of transmission of knowledge through art have disappeared in the West. For several centuries, the artistic practice has disconnected from its particular form of inner search. All that is left is the motivation some artists have to find “the secret” hidden in their form of expression. It is in the East, and especially in the Zen tradition of Buddhism, where these lineages are still alive. In each one of the disciplines within this tradition, there are generations of masters whose connection goes back in time.

Zen has a strong experiential, non-intellectual basis. The teachings are transmitted through action and example, with minimal explanations.

The word Zen comes from the Sanskrit “dhyana,” which means “mindfulness of the present moment.” Its practice is not limited exclusively to sitting meditation, which they call zazen, but can be applied to any action we perform. This facilitated that, in those places where Zen has been practiced, it contributed to the development of different artistic forms and even created some of its own, like the tea ceremony.

Each of the different artistic paths influenced by Zen is called a “Way”: Chadō is the Way of Tea, Kadō is the Way of the Flower, Shodō is the Way of Calligraphy, and Kyudō is the Way of Archery. The suffix “Dō” means “Way to connect with reality.”

Zen arts have no practical use. Neither they intend to provide us with aesthetic enjoyment. Their goal is neither set on the object nor on the result that is achieved, but on training consciousness. This is a significant difference between the Western view and the classical Eastern view.

Often, we act thinking about how the photograph we are taking will turn out. Our mind is not placed in the action, but it is more concerned with how we will impress others when they see “our work.” When the Kyudō practitioner does his shooting exercises, the target is just a couple of meters away. It is practically impossible to fail. Hitting the center of the target is of no importance.

In the same way that we call the different expressions of Zen art “Ways”, we could also speak about the Way of Photography. The word “Way” refers to a path that we are traversing, which can be divided into stages; it passes through different places and, most importantly, it leads to knowledge.

Each of the arts in Zen has a tradition many centuries old. In comparison, photography is relatively new; it is a discovery of the Western culture. In addition to this, photography is currently fully present in our lives and it is very easy to take photos; therefore, we have a medium which is closer to our way of life than the practice of archery or the making of calligraphies. Moreover, photography has characteristics that makes it ideal for this practice. The first one is that it works with our visual perception. The photographic practice is based on the ability to see clearly. Focusing our attention on our sight reduces the number of thoughts and provides us with mental calmness.

The second characteristic is that it works in the present moment, in the “here and now”. Practically speaking, it is a consequence of the previous characteristic: We cannot be aware of our visual perceptions if we are not present, if our mind is in the past or in the future. Visual reality is constantly changing and, as photographers know very well, if you do not capture the image at the moment, it is forever lost.

The third characteristic is more difficult to understand if we do not have at least some experience in practicing meditation. It says that photography is a way in which the perceiver and the perceived are in union. This union is called “contemplation”. It is traditionally expressed with the phrase: “We are not two, but we are not one either.” We experience it occasionally when we take photos: we are so absorbed in what we see that we forget about ourselves for a moment.

The last characteristic has to do with the power of the image: if we know how to read them, in all photographs we can recognize the inner state the photographer had at the moment he took the photo. This is something I constantly experience when I comment on my students’ photographs: by looking at their photos I can recognize their mental state, what motivated them or what difficulties they experienced at the moment when they took the photo. It has always seemed magic-like to me and never ceases to amaze me. Stephen Shore expresses it with the following phrase: *“As time goes on, I have discovered how subtly sensitive photography is to the mental state of the photographer.”*

# Photographic Lineages

The concept of lineage entails a transmission of knowledge between a master and a person who becomes the receiver of that knowledge, the disciple. I am referring to the knowledge that comes from experience and not the intellectual knowledge that we get from books. I can read a lot about the depth of field, but if I don't put it into practice, it will be of no use to me.

The Way of Photography is nourished by the contributions of various traditions that enrich this form of practicing photography with their particular point of view. No view can impose its truth on the others, but rather they complement each other. We can choose among them according to our preferences and affinities. Following the Way of Photography does not mean adhering to a specific movement or having to take photographs in a specific way.

We can divide the lineages in photography as a path of knowledge into two large groups. The first consists of photographers who followed the different movements that have occurred throughout history. Each of them had a different approach to the photographic experience that is reflected in photographs with a recognizable style. The artistic practice through photography is their motivation.

The second group includes all the lineages that come from a spiritual tradition. They differ from the first group in that their ultimate motivation is not art itself, but the practitioner's personal evolution. The goal of the first lineage lies on the work it produces, while the second focuses on the internal process that the experience entails. Buddhism is the tradition that has had the greatest influence on photography, but there are also approaches influenced by Taoism or Christianity.

Each of these two groups contributes with its own particularities to the Way of Photography. The first is related to art and poetry through the metaphorical experience. This is how Minor White defines the Equivalent: a visual metaphor. The goal of photography would not be to document the objects of the world, but rather use them as a symbol of certain quality that is not directly visible in the image. This vision corresponds to the right side of the brain, which is analogical, spatial, intuitive, artistic, and visual.

In the second group, Master Chögyam Trungpa's teachings on perception stand out, which were further developed about 30 years ago by two of his disciples, John McQuad and Michael Wood, and were given the name Miksang, which means "Good eye" in Tibetan. Their contribution is mainly didactic, due to the structure and method with which the three levels of learning that help transmit their particular view of photography are built. It corresponds to the left side of the brain, which is logical, sequential, verbal, and numerical.

It is clear that we need both approaches to have a complete picture. Structure without heart becomes something rigid and dry. Heart without structure overflows and does not have a clear direction to guide its efforts. In Buddhist terms, the first corresponds to wisdom and the second to compassion. We have wisdom when we no longer have to think much about the photographic technique that we need to take the photos because we have integrated it in us. We have compassion when we feel united with that aspect of the world that we are photographing, whether it is a living being or not, because we know that both the object and we are impermanent, that we are constantly changing, and that the encounter we are having now will never again be repeated.

## Minor White's Legacy

Although we cannot say that the Way of Photography has a creator, it is legitimate to point out Minor White as the photographer with whom this path begins and who first applies it when teaching photography to his students. It is no longer just a matter of finding ways to create higher quality artistic photographs, but it is about going beyond and discovering what lies on the other side of the mirror of the visible world. He himself points it out with the phrase: *"The function of painting is to make visible the invisible. The function of working with photography is to invoke the invisible through the visible."*

But what is meant by "the invisible"? It refers to the photographer's inner world projected onto the different objects of the visual world with which he identifies unconsciously and that he is able to recognize later in the image. As Minor White says, *"In a deliberate act, imagine that everything that you find in an image is within you."* A certain dose of courage is required to carry out this process.

Minor White was the last one of the great masters of the Straight Photography's lineage. He took the legacy of the photographers who preceded him and raised it up to its highest point. His mentors were Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams. From Stieglitz, White incorporated the concept of "Equivalence"; from Weston he learned the commitment to photography; and from Adams he assimilated the Zone System, which he taught to his students just a few hours after he had learned it. He was completely committed to photography, not only as a photographer, but also as an editor, theorist, and teacher.

His personal search led him first to Christianity and, finally, to become a Zen meditation practitioner and a member of Gurdjieff group in New York —Gurdjieff was an early 20th century Armenian master.

He searched for the union between the path of art and that of transcendence, which led him to develop a series of practices related to photography, both at the moment of taking photographs and when looking at the images. The preparation for any of these moments entails a calm and fully attentive mental state achieved through relaxation and mental concentration exercises applied to photography. This preparation becomes a sort of ritual that helps us enter a receptive and mindful state, which facilitates that “one hears the photo speaking”. It is a state of heightened awareness. Achieving this state is the inner work of the photographer. The goal is the development of perception. Its purpose is to awaken people.

## Miksang Teachings

Miksang is a Tibetan word that translates as “Good Eye”. This school of Contemplative Photography combines the art of photography, the discipline of meditation, and the Dharma Art teachings of the meditation master Chögyam Trungpa.

Chögyam Trungpa was one of the first Tibetan masters to arrive in the West as part of the diaspora that followed the Chinese invasion of Tibet. One of his main concerns was to transmit a Buddhism free from the cultural influences of his country of origin. For this reason, he let go of his Tibetan monk’s robes and adopted a Western lifestyle. His work consisted of sowing numerous seeds in various fields, both in the field of meditation and in the field of art, so that others could develop them later. Prominent artists of the Beat generation studied with him. Moreover, he founded the Shambhala organization with the purpose of preserving the purity of the teachings throughout time. Miksang is one of them. The practice it promotes is based on Chögyam Trungpa’s teachings on perception, from which two of his disciples, John McQuade and Michel Wood, developed a structure in order to transmit them.

Chögyam Trungpa points out that there is a basic goodness in the ability to see. Just imagine the reaction of a blind person when they have just regained their sight and see for the first time. Trungpa also emphasizes that *“the only magic that exists is this life, this world, the particular phenomena that we are all experiencing at this very moment, here and now”*. We cannot fill our sense of emptiness outside of the reality in which we live, and for that we must accept that things are just the way they are. The following phrase summarizes the work he proposes with Photography, *“We simply establish a precise*



*and direct relationship with two aspects: the functioning of sight and perception at the moment of looking at an object and the changes that take place in our consciousness when we look at that object”.*

Going back to Miksang, we can say that it is one of the most significant contributions that Buddhism has made to the Way of Photography, along with the influence that Zen had on Minor White. Miksang teachings gave rise to ideas such as the synchronization of the eye and the mind, the basic contemplative form of the Dot in Space applied to photography, and the recognition of the Flash of Perception. It differs from other trends because it offers a structure of the teachings in three levels, which is quite enlightening for those interested in embarking on this path. Until recently, its influence was limited to the United States and Canada, but it recently started to be known in Europe.

## Looking and Seeing

I confess that I am a functionally blind person, except when I go out to take photos. This is the first teaching of the Way of Photography: to acknowledge the fact that we often go through life as if we were blind.

Chögyam Trungpa offers us a revealing phrase, “*We usually do not see anything at all*”. Being aware of our blindness is the first step to become able to see. It is not that our eyes do not work properly; it is the fact that we live absorbed in our thoughts, disconnected from our senses, isolated from the world and in a constant internal dialogue. There are problems with vision that are not due to a malfunction of the organ of sight, but they originate from some dysfunction of the area of the brain that regulates it. We function as if having that problem, hence the term “functional blindness”.

This disconnection plunges us into a kind of fog in which everything that we perceive acquires the same tone of gray. However, when we pay attention, our perceptions intensify. We see objects and scenes with a very particular and defined color, light, and shape. The visual world is extraordinarily rich and generous. It is there for us to appreciate and enjoy.

We stop seeing because it often causes us pain. Sometimes, we do not like what we see; we wished that the light was different or that the objects had different colors and shapes. We find it hard to accept the reality that things are the way they are.

For example, if when I take a photo of a landscape, I am bothered by an electrical tower appearing in the image, it is because I do not accept reality. That object interferes with my search for the perfect photograph. When comparing the idealized image in my mind with the one shown in the photo,

and noticing something that does not match, I experience a frustration that hurts. I may be tempted to eliminate it using some trick or by retouching it; but by doing so, the photo loses the strength provided by the element that had bothered me. Perfect images, far from the real world, turn out to be bland, monotonous, and boring.

We often use the words “look” and “see” interchangeably, which can lead to confusion. The fundamental difference between the two lies in attention. We have all experienced moments when, while walking down the street, someone greets us, and we respond: “Sorry, I didn’t see you”. He may have crossed our visual field, but we have paid just a limited attention enough to avoid colliding with him. We have not really seen him; we have not been aware of his presence. Seeing implies a conscious observation, directing our attention to the experience of visual perception. In the Way of Photography, we use the camera to see with full awareness of our perception, and then transform that perception into a photograph.

I suggest a simple exercise that will increase your visual awareness, helping you to recognize the two basic ways of looking. The first one is the one we normally use: a direct look focused on one point. Practice it by directing your gaze towards an object that is several meters away, like a light switch. This way of looking is related with concentration, as it focuses on a small central area. Then—without moving your eyes!—be aware of the complete visual field that you can see, approximately 180 degrees. This is the second way of looking: the panoramic one. It is wide and somewhat unfocused, and it includes all the objects in front of us without focusing on any of them in particular. When we look in this way, our eyes relax and rest. It is the way of looking that is used when meditating with the eyes open.

When we switch from one way of looking to another, we move our consciousness without physically moving our eyes.

Initially, we direct our attention to the central area, and then, to the peripheral visual field. Our physical eyes remain still; we only shift the focus of our attention. Without attention, we cannot be aware, and without awareness, we cannot see. To summarize: Seeing is seeing with awareness.

This has important implications for our photographic practice. We need to develop a broad vision when taking photos and observe not only what we want to photograph, but also everything that surrounds it. Without losing attention to the main subject of our photos, we must be aware of the activities of the secondary actors and the scenario in which they unfold. To do this, it is necessary to practice panoramic vision.

## Photobiography

Luis Ochandorena Lizarraga. Barcelona (Spain), 1959

My interest in creative photography began more than 40 years ago. Now I see my relationship with it as a journey that I would not have undertaken without the passion that it provokes in me. This passion, like that which occurs in a romantic relationship, has gone through various stages.

During my training period, I was fortunate to learn from the most renowned Spanish photographers of the time: Eduard Olivella, Manolo Laguillo, Joan Fontcuberta, and Humberto Rivas, to name just a few. Their example motivated me to hold several individual and collective exhibitions in various places in Spain.

A second phase, which we can call professionalization, began when I started teaching at the Institut d'Estudis Fotogràfics de Catalunya. Shortly after, I left my work at the bank to set up an advertising photography studio. I learned a lot from it, because it is a very demanding field, technically speaking. The job demanded a dedication such that, slowly by slowly I stopped taking my own photographs.

Shortly after, I experienced a personal crisis that led me to seek an outlet through therapy and meditation. It was a phase of photographic desert that ended when I began to realize that there is a way to unite the two worlds: the artistic and the spiritual. I devoted myself to search for any sign that would point to that path in the texts written by other photographers and in their works. I discovered that there is no

real separation between the artistic and spiritual worlds: Art is a form of spirituality without religion. I also found that each form of artistic expression has its own method and its own path.

Two pillars have been my support on this journey: Minor White and his concept of the Equivalent, and Chögyam Trungpa with his teachings on visual perception. They provided me with a solid base to lean on in my photographic practice.

Finally, I have written a book as a way to collect the fruits of this journey and synthesize what I have learned. Its title is: “The Way of Photography”. Currently, I’m interested in being able to transmit this knowledge to others and accompany them on the journey that the artistic experience implies.

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## images of the book

