CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TAOIST SAGE IN THE CHUANG-TZU AND THE CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

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Leap into the boundless and make it your home! -The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 49)

The Chuang-tzu is an ancient Taoist collection of writings most likely compiled in the fourth, third, and second centuries B.C.E. (Graham, 1990, p. 283). The complete work, known today as the Chuang-tzu, consists of thirty-three sections. The first seven, the nei-p’ien (inner chapters), most likely written earlier than the other sections, set forth the major ideas of the work (Watson, 1968). The next fifteen sections are referred to by scholars as the wai-p’ien (outer chapters), and the remaining eleven sections, as the tsa-p’ien (miscellaneous chapters).

Although uncertainties remain about the precise authorship of this distinctive work, it has long been recognized for its vivid and imaginative style in characterizing Taoist principles as they are manifest in the everyday life of the Taoist Sage. Approached with a receptive attitude, the Chuang-tzu can also function as an evocative work capable of transforming and liberating the reader’s mind (Allinson, 1989; Gross & Shapiro, 1993; Watson, 1968; Wu, 1990).

Stylistically, the Chuang-tzu is an engaging, earthy, literary work—by turns didactic, comical, and anecdotal. In content, it is a psychoepistemic guide to Taoist wisdom, the obstacles to self-understanding, and the characteristics of the Sage—one who has "leaped into the boundless" and made it "home."

It is said of Chuang Chou himself, a reputed author of the Chuang-tzu:

Above he wandered with the Creator, below he made friends with those who have gotten outside of life and death, who know nothing of beginning or end. As for the Source, his grasp of it was broad, expansive, and penetrating; profound, liberal, and unimpeded ... in responding to change and expounding on the world of things, he set forth principles that

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will never cease to be valid, an approach that can never be shuffled off (Watson, 1968, pp. 373-374).

We have used the *Chuang-tzu* as a classroom text for some years, and, personally, as a guide to the art of living. In addition to our interest in the *Chuang-tzu*, we also share an interest in the practice of photography, and in its use in the classroom as a means of facilitating transpersonal vision. As photographers, we could not help but notice that the characteristics of the Sage found in the *Chuang-tzu* are sometimes echoed by statements we find in the photography literature about the art of creative photography.

Although few creative photographers are likely to have had direct acquaintance with the *Chuang-tzu*, the principles they sometimes describe, or propose as a way to liberate one’s vision and increase photographic artistry, bear a remarkable resemblance to the principles of sagehood expressed in the *Chuang-tzu*. The *Chuang-tzu* does not directly enumerate a list of the main characteristics of the Sage, but we found it useful to compile such a list from the many descriptions of the Sage scattered throughout the work (Gross & Shapiro, 1993). The characteristics of the Taoist Sage can be subsumed under the following concepts: (a) freedom from the sense of self; (b) receptivity; (c) *wu-wei*; (d) spontaneity; (e) acceptance; (f) nonattachment; (g) resourcefulness; (h) free and easy wandering; and, (i) *te*?

Our purpose in this study, therefore, is to call the reader’s attention to some parallels between the ancient principles of sagehood in the *Chuang-tzu* and creativity in the modern art of photography. We then offer some comments on the degree, prevalence, source, and evocation of the similitude.

FREEDOM FROM THE SENSE OF SELF

*The photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better.* –Minor White (Sontag, 1989, p. 116)

In a variety of passages, the *Chuang-tzu* invites the reader to challenge the ordinary unquestioned assumption about an abiding, personal self. For example: “The Barrier Keeper Yin said, ‘When a man does not dwell in self, then things will of themselves reveal their forms to him’” (Watson, 1968, p. 372). And, elsewhere the *Chuang-tzu* counsels: “Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgetter of self. The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven” (Watson, 1968, p. 133).

The Sage recognizes the indivisibility of human beings and the environment. Hence, it makes little sense to proclaim: "This is me! And there is the environment." By not limiting his or her awareness to a unique sense of self, the Sage is able to embrace fully—indeed, be an integral part of—the whole process of nature "happening": The sense of self is forgotten, "lost" in a greater universal perspective—the *Tao*.

Similarly, some photographers, in their writings, hint at this experience of being free from the sense of self. For example, Jeff Bernet (1975) describes the experience of conscious camerawork? as an unobstructed communion between self and environment: "After probing appearances and deepening vision through the *second sight* of
photography, the photographer emerges as one in whom experience is a perpetual communion, with or without lens” (p. 124). Chang (1970), describing the experience of wholeness in the practice of Taoist painting, uses the Buddhist expression, "yung yung wu ai, or 'complete unobstructed interpenetration' of things” (p. 94). For Chang, this experience is synonymous with an understanding of the Tao which he describes as "an intuitive, immediate awareness rather than a mediated, inferential, or intellectual process” (p. 19). Thus, Chang adds, the "Tao does not blossom into vital consciousness until all distinctions between self and nonself have disappeared" (p. 19).

This merging of self and environment or nature in the practice of photography may lead to the recognition that it is no longer the individuated self who takes the picture but that the picture is being taken by itself. In Sebastiso Salgado's words (Marx, 1994): "There comes a moment when it is no longer you who takes the photograph, but receives the way to do it quite naturally and fully” (p. 114).

For some photographers, the merging of self with the subject matter is a prerequisite to convey effectively one's vision through the language of photography. As Adam Jahiel (1995) says, "If we do our job right, we in a sense become what we photograph” (p. 27). Henri Cartier-Bresson, emphasizing the need to forget oneself, also suggests that a photographer must merge with the environment: "I find that you have to blend in like a fish in water, you have to forget yourself” (Bishop, 1992, p. 77). And, in the following passage, Cartier-Bresson (1988) elaborates on the necessity of being free from the sense of self:

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 won't get it. First you must lose your self. Then it happens (p. 94).

RECEPTIVITY

The sage's mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things. -The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 142)

Freedom from the sense of self and receptivity are closely related. The capacity to be fully receptive is obstructed if the sense of self stands in the way of a holistic perception of the world. The Chuang-tzu notes that the constant influx of socially reinforced values, such as the desire for fame, wealth, and knowledge, helps keep alive the illusion of an abiding self: "With likes and dislikes, sounds and colors you cripple what is on the inside; with leather caps and snipefeathered bonnets, batons stuck in belts and sashes trailing, you cramp what is on the outside” (Watson, 1968, p. 141). According to the Chuang-tzu, when one is free from a frame of mind called Little Understanding (i.e., being subservient to various discriminations such as recognition and authority, rejecting and accepting, liking and disliking), a frame of mind called Great Understanding becomes unbound and free to manifest itself. Great Understanding is a state of mind empty of received ideas and beliefs. It is not a blank, nihilistic state in which nothing exists, but rather reflects a state of openness and
receptivity in which past knowledge neither taints nor constricts the perception of the present moment in all its fullness.

Such a state of receptivity is alluded to by some creative photographers:

It's easy to fall into imitating yourself. I try to take a fresh approach to all the shots, to be really open to what I'm seeing rather than having a premeditated idea about what I'm going to shoot, or forcing a statement out of something that's not there. My good pictures really come from my being responsive (Maclean, 1995, p. 51).

Out in the field I try not to hold expectations. I try to achieve an openness. The senses heighten so that I'm totally immersed in what's happening at the moment. I want to be receptive to an image coming together (Lazelle, 1993, p. 25).

A receptive approach is also regarded by some photographers as the most effective way to avoid cliches in photographs. In an interview about his approach to photography, Edouart Boubat says:

All my photographs are about meetings and about coups de foudre - I love at first sight. To do that type of photography, one must wipe their canvas clean to prepare for chance encounters, be open and aware to such moments, otherwise it becomes a cliche-already seen and expected (1995, p. 26).

By being open to both the environment and the photographer's emotions (allowing himself to experience coups de foudre), it appears that Boubat's sense of self does not interfere with his chance encounters but rather merges with them, allowing him to respond instantaneously to photographic opportunities. Such an ability to be open to both the environment and one's emotions, according to Kathryn Marx (1994), allows for greater receptivity: "The greater the range of emotions that you permit yourself to feel and show, the greater is your receptivity to what you see before your viewfinder" (p.52).

In practice, however, receptivity is not always a conspicuous theme in photography; indeed the need for total control over the creative process sometimes predominates. Nonetheless, most photographers, even the most controlling ones, recognize that receptivity plays a vital role in their work simply because they must frequently act instantly. Overall, both control and receptivity can contribute to the practice of photography:

A split-second decision determines whether you capture a situation, as well as how well you capture it. You've already thought about your subject and know the reason why you've placed yourself in a particular situation. But once you are there, you must try to empty your mind of all thought in order for you to be completely in the moment and receptive to your intuition and your surroundings. Simply react to them with uncluttered clarity (Marx, 1994, p. 114).

In sum, receptivity in the Chuan-me corresponds to an open state of mind in which the present moment is experienced in its full richness, free from the entanglement of the discriminatory mind. In photography, receptivity is described as freedom from premeditated ideas, openness to seeing the world freshly, releasing expectations,
being immersed in the photographic moment, and sensitivity to one's emotions. In both the *Chuang-tzu* and in photography, receptivity encompasses a form of freedom from past knowledge, which can provide a gateway to openness and full immersion in the present moment.

Beyond its usefulness for creating good photographs, however, receptivity is also a state of mind worthy of enjoyment in and of itself. Such is the view put forth by Michael Smith (1992) when he was asked what he looks for when he photographs: "I am not looking for anything. I'm just looking—trying to have as full an experience as possible. The point is to have a full experience—the photograph is just a bonus" (p. 36).

Smith's comment relates to another Taoist concept which suggests that when attuned to the Tao, an individual can effortlessly be creative and productive. The Chinese expression which captures this concept is *wu-wei*, another of the characteristics of the Sage in the *Chuang-tzu*.

**WU-WEI**

Superiors must adopt inaction and make the world work for them; inferiors must adopt action and work for the world. -The *Chuang-tzu* (Watson, 1968, p. 144)

*Wu-wei* has been variously translated into English as "inaction" (Watson, 1968, p. 6), "not forcing" (Watts, 1975, p. 76), and "doing nothing" (Graham, 1989, p. 288). Ames (1989) describes the concept of *wu-wei* as: "... responding with an awareness that enables one to maximize the creative possibilities of himself in his environment" (p. 140). Watson (1968) interprets the concept of *wu-wei* to mean that the Sage does not ratiocinate before acting but adopts "a course of action that is not founded upon any purposeful motives of gain or striving" (p. 6). This seems to correspond to Brett Weston's (1989) observation: "When I photograph, I don't have anything in mind except the photograph. I don't think in terms of magazines, books, or promotions. I photograph for the love and the excitement" (p. 76). Another passage by Brett's father, Edward Weston (1979), also seems to illustrate the dynamics of *wu-wei* in photography:

One does not think during creative work, any more than one thinks when driving a car. But one has a background of years-learning, unlearning, success, failure, dreaming, thinking, experience, all this—then the moment of creation, the focusing of all into the moment. So I can make "without thought," fifteen carefully considered negatives, one every fifteen minutes, given material with as many possibilities. But there is all the eyes have seen in this life to influence me (p. 280).

The sense of effortless effort can be found elsewhere in the photography literature as well. Ruth Bernhard says about her approach to photography: "I never look for a photograph. The photograph finds me and says, 'I'm here!' and says, 'Yes I see you. I hear you'" (Conrad, 1994, p. 28). Manuel Alvarez Bravo emphasizes that his effortless attitude is not limited to photography but applies to his approach to life as well: "Throughout my life I've never pursued anything. I just let things pursue me ...
they just show up... This is the way I've led my life, not just in photography but in life” (Harris, 1994, p. 31).

Wu-wei, however, should not be viewed as an indolent approach to life but rather as an effective way to get things done. To act in accord with the principle of wu-wei, one must remain in a state of receptivity—not in a passive, torpid state of mind, but rather in a state of relaxed alertness, continuously attuned to the ceaseless transformations of life. This state of inward and outward harmonization with the flow of life allows both the Sage and the creative photographer to act naturally and spontaneously in harmony with the ceaseless transformations that constitute the course of living.

**SPONTANEITY**

*[The Sage] constantly goes by the spontaneous and does not add anything to the process of life.* - The Chuang-tzu (Graham, 1989, p. 82)

For most photographers, spontaneity is an essential component of their art. A posed photograph rarely has as much of an impact upon an audience as a spontaneous one. Ellen Denuto (Schaub, 1995) says: "Even when working on assignment, my best images are those that are spontaneous. I find my best work is unplanned—it comes from the heart. I photograph what moves me" (p. 16). Spontaneity? is also one of the basic tenets of Taoist philosophy:

> While all other things move spontaneously on the course proper to them, man has stunted and maimed his spontaneous aptitude by the habit of distinguishing alternatives, the right and the wrong, benefit and harm, self and others, and reasoning in order to judge between them. To recover and educate his knack he must learn to reflect his situation with the unclouded clarity of a mirror, and respond to it with the immediacy of an echo to a sound or shadow to a shape (Graham, 1989, p. 6).

This description of spontaneity is echoed in the writings of one of the masters of spontaneous photography, Cartier-Bresson (1992): "For me, the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously" (p. 333).

Both Graham and Cartier-Bresson concur in suggesting that spontaneous actions involve a synchronicity between subject and object. In Graham's words, subject and object respond to each other "with the immediacy of an echo to a sound or shadow to a shape"; Cartier-Bresson explains it in terms of the simultaneity of questioning and deciding. Furthermore, both writers imply that spontaneity requires an involvement between subject and object. For Cartier-Bresson (1992), the photographer needs to "feel involved in what one singles out through the viewfinder" (p. 333). Graham (1989), in his exposition of the Chuang-tzu, uses stronger terms, stating that the subject is totally absorbed in the object:

> People who really know what they are doing, such as a cook carving an ox, or a carpenter or an angler, do not precede each move by weighing the arguments for different alternatives. They spread attention over the whole situation, let its focus roam freely, forget...
themselves in their total absorption in the object, and then the trained hand reacts spontaneously with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves (p. 6).

Spontaneity in the Chuang-tzu, as described by Graham (1989), naturally occurs when an individual forgets himself or herself and gives up being fixated upon control over the environment. Only when an individual is fully in tune with his or her ever-changing environment can he or she harmoniously respond to it like the "echo to a sound or shadow to a shape" (p. 6).

ACCEPTANCE

Mysteriously, wonderfully, I bid farewell to what goes, I greet what comes. For what comes cannot be denied, and what goes cannot be detained.

-The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 213)

Acceptance is not a form of resignation but a natural response of being in tune with the manifestations of nature. By embracing all of life, the Sage can remain free of inner conflicts. Attuned to the ceaseless flow of life, the Sage apprehends that resisting this flow would generate conflict: acceptance and harmony thus naturally emerge as the most appropriate and natural approach to the art of living.

Acceptance is also a characteristic of the unconstricted, taoistic photographer, that is, a photographer not unduly governed by pre-established thought, perception, interpretation, and action. Acceptance, especially with regard to subject matter and atmospheric conditions, allows the photographer to explore photographic visions beyond conventional, premolded visions that have already been seen and photographed.

Both the Sage and the taoistic photographer have the capacity for seeing with unconstricted awareness and are therefore capable of seeing the miraculous in the ordinary. Such seeing, however, requires a nondiscriminatory, accepting attitude toward all aspects of life. In contrast, when photographers insist upon capturing only smiling faces or sunny landscapes, they not only reject the miraculousness of other moments, but they also narrow the scope of their capacity to appreciate the complexity of life and diminish their ability to see beyond already established photographic conventions.

Diane Arbus, through her unusual photographs which exhibit an "acceptance of the appalling" (Sontag, 1989, p. 34), offers "an occasion to demonstrate that life's horror can be faced without squeamishness. The photographer once had to say to herself, Okay, I can accept that; the viewer is invited to make the same declaration" (Sontag, 1989, p. 40). Arbus' acceptance of "freaks"? as photographic subjects, however, may not have emerged from being free of the entanglement of the discriminatory mind, but as a reaction against a sheltered upbringing in which she felt deprived of the opportunity to experience "adversity" (Sontag, 1989, p. 43). But regardless of what her motivation might have been, Arbus' ability to accept what was deemed unacceptable in her time expanded the definition of what is now considered as appropriate to
photograph, as well as enriched her own life with excitement: "Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me?" (Arbus, 1989, p. 94).

Another type of acceptance found in the practice of photography is an all-embracing attitude based on the recognition that all subjects are worthy of attention. Cartier-Bresson (1973) equates such acceptance with an affirmation of all of life. As he so enthusiastically proclaims: "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!" (p. 82). Such openness and affirmation of life seem more in accord with the spirit of the Chuang-tzu than Arbus' approach, which is more restricted in terms of its subject matter. The accepting attitudes of both Arbus and Cartier-Bresson, however, allowed these photographers to break free of some of the conventions of constricted awareness—Little Understanding—and to recognize new dimensions of photography and life.

Besides becoming more accepting of a wider range of subject matter, a photographer may gain access to new visions of life if he or she is willing to work in diverse conditions. Alfred Stieglitz, for example, recalled that when he took his famous photograph of the Flat Iron Building in New York during the snowstorm of 1902-1903, he saw and experienced that building in a new way. He recalls: "I stood spellbound as I saw the building in that storm.... I suddenly saw the building as I had never seen it before" (Norman, 1976, p. 6).

On the other hand, a photographer who only works on sunny, windless days, may exclude many other dimensions of life, thus narrowing the possibilities of photographic vision. Rain, wind, lightning, snowstorms, hail, fog, night, and other less conventional photographic environmental situations can inspire photographers to see things freshly. A prerequisite to engaging life fully, to seeing beyond smiling faces and sunny days, is, like the Sage in the Chuang-tzu, to have the capacity for being attuned to life's ceaseless transformations.

NONATTACHMENT

_The perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror-going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing._ -The _Chuang-tzu_ (Watson, 1968, p. 54)

In harmony with the parade of life's ceaseless transformations, the Sage is not attached to particular events or to a particular way of life. Desiring to possess nothing, to fixate upon nothing, the Sage is free to adapt to the flow of existence. And by remaining nonattached, the Sage does not engender conflicts with his or her surroundings, choosing instead to embrace everything as one seamless field of nature. Such a state of nonattachment, as the Zen practitioner Herrigel (1953) explains, is also the ideal condition for the practicing artist: "Out of the fullness of this presence of mind, disturbed by no ulterior motive, the artist who is released from all attachment must practice his art" (p. 120).
In photography, being nonattached—especially to conventional perception—plays an important role in the photographer’s ability to be aware of the constant flux of life and therefore responsive to new or changing scenes. Derek Doeffinger (1992) advises photographers to release their expectations so that they can be free to tune into the environment they photograph:

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 (p. 76).

As Doeffinger suggests, not only can the attachment to preset images produce frustration, it can also interfere with creativity by preventing the photographer from freely adapting to the environment at hand.

Attachment to habitual ways of seeing can impede clear seeing by interposing filters of expectations (e.g., visual expectations) between the environment and the viewer. By not being attached to predefined images, the liberated photographer, like the Taoist Sage, can respond creatively and freshly to life’s changing circumstances.

Impermanence, transition, transformation—each can be seen as a blessing by the percipient photographer. If things never changed, photography would quickly become a boring occupation—the photographer who has seen it all would quickly become jaded and starved for surprises. Impermanence, from this perspective, insures that nature will continuously provide a supply of new images to the aware photographer.

In a world that is inherently impermanent, wave after wave of photographic opportunities keeps rolling in. When a photographer is aware of this boundless stream of photographic opportunities, he or she may also come to realize that attachment to a lost image (e.g., lamenting a missed shot) is not only unproductive, but that it also constricts awareness and interferes with the perception of new photographic possibilities.

By apprehending the law of ceaseless transformation (impermanence), the unconstricted photographer can reside in a state of relaxed alertness, open to oncoming waves of opportunity. The French surrealist Andre Breton described Cartier-Bresson’s attitude in these terms:

Actually it’s quite true that he’s [Cartier-Bresson] not waiting for anyone since he’s not made any appointment, but the very fact that he’s adopting this ultra-receptive posture means that by this he wants to help chance along, how should I say, to put himself in a state of grace with chance, so that something might happen, so that someone might drop in (Cartier-Bresson, 1976, unpaginated).
RESOURCEFULNESS

When the monkey trainer was handing out acorns, he said, "You get three in the morning and four at night." This made all the monkeys furious. "Well, then," he said, "You get four in the morning and three at flight." The monkeys were delighted.
- The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 41)

Resourcefulness—which includes the ability to see realms beyond our conditioned, habitual ways of seeing—is another characteristic of the Sage as found in the Chuang-tzu. The Sage sees beyond convention; this freedom enables the Sage to undertake new and creative ways of thinking and living—to be a constant reservoir of resourcefulness.

In photography, resourcefulness can be described as the capacity to discover new ways of apprehending the world. Thus, resourcefulness, although closely related to nonattachment and acceptance, goes beyond them to actively seeking out novel situations. An example is the following comment by Jerry Jacka: "Many people will go to Monument Valley [Utah-Arizona] and if it's raining or snowing they pack it up and go home. A really serious photographer will make the storm work to his or her advantage" (Goodpasture, 1994, p. 52). By being caught in the preconceived belief that only clear atmospheric conditions can yield good pictures, inflexible photographers may fail to exploit the unexpected opportunity afforded by "adversity." A taoistic photographer, like the monkey trainer in the Chuang-tzu, does not rebel against this flow of life, but moves with it, finding novel ways to make use of the current.

Ed Feingersh points out that good pictures are seldom the result of following formulas but are, on the contrary, the result of a "hit"—the spontaneous response which comes from being attuned to the photographic environment. Feingersh (1979) states:

Mediocre pictures may follow a formula, good ones seldom do: When the visual tools are used just right, the design, lighting, mood, and emotion come together to just the right point, and that point hits you and you know what the photographer meant—that's a good picture (p. 273).

In some books and workshops on photography, exercises are taught to free up a photographer's vision and promote resourcefulness by encouraging new perspectives, breaking traditional rules of photography, and questioning assumptions. As Andreas Feininger has said, "Seeing in terms of photography means realizing potentialities: visualizing things not as they are, but as they could be made to appear in picture form" (1978, p. 223).

FREE AND EASY WANDERING

So the sage has his wanderings. -The Chuang-tzu (Watson, 1968, p. 75)

The Sage is often described in the Chuang-in: as a purposeless, free and easy wanderer: "Embody to the fullest what has no end and wander where there is no trail"
A parallel to free and easy wandering in the *Chuang-tzu* can also be gleaned from the photography literature, especially the concept of the flaneur photographer. A literal translation of the definition of the French word *flaneur* (the verb *flâner*) is: "To wander without a goal; at random; to move forward without hurrying" (*Le Petit Larousse Illustre*).

The expression *flaneur* photographer is used in the photography literature to describe an individual who wanders with a camera, taking pictures of chance encounters. Cecil Beaton and Gail Buckland (1989), for example, describe Charles Negre (1820-1880) as "a *flaneur* photographer ... [who] roamed the streets ... taking pictures of bizarre types and odd encounters" (p. 48). Other well-known French *flaneur* photographers include Robert Doisneau, famous for his many perspicacious photographs of Paris, and Cartier-Bresson known for the incisive photographs he took while roving the world or at home in the streets of Paris.

Although it would be too simplistic to equate a *flâneur* photographer with a Taoist Sage, studies of several photographers suggest that their wanderings could be viewed as taoistic. When engaged in camerawork, Cartier-Bresson, especially, seems to embody the characteristics of the Taoist Sage.14 Galassi (1987) points out that Cartier-Bresson's free and easy wandering was influenced early on by the surrealist movement" which, among other things, favored a type of alert wandering and openness to new realities: "Alone, the Surrealist wanders the streets without destination but with a premeditated alertness for the unexpected detail that will release a marvelous and compelling reality just beneath the banal surface of ordinary experience" (p. 15). This description adds a taoistic flavor to the character of the surrealist *flaneur* by emphasizing both a lack of destination and a state of relaxed awareness.

The relaxed awareness and purposeless wandering exhibited by Cartier-Bresson and other *flaneur* photographers (e.g., Boubat, Doisneau, Negre, and Winogrand) suggest that, overall, both the unconstricted photographer and the Taoist Sage may engage in purposeless wandering. Attuned to the ever-changing environment, they can respond to it naturally, creatively, and spontaneously.

*TE*

*Looking is a gift, but seeing is a power.* -Jeff Berner (1975, p. 17)

The final characteristic of the Sage found in the *Chuang-tzu* that corresponds to the creative photographer is *te*. This is a concept found frequently in the Taoist literature 16 and generally translated as virtue (Ames, 1989; Fung, 1964; Watson, 1968; Watts, 1975; Wu, 1990). or power (Ames, 1989; Graham, 1989).

When the meaning of *te* is associated with power, it conveys a form of ability, skill, strength, or energy. It is, however, power in the sense of effectiveness or potency without the connotation of domination, rigidity, or self-aggrandizement. Graham (1989) expresses it this way: "The spontaneous aptitude is the *te*, the 'Power: the inherent capacity of a thing to perform its specific functions successfully" (p. 7).
Te is certainly evident in the behavior of the Sage as a capacity for spontaneous wisdom, but one can also see the concept of te in the work of artists and artisans. Indeed, the Chuang-tzu often provides descriptions of various craftspeople in action. Probably the most well-known of these is Cook Ting cutting up an ox:

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the kniile along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music....

"I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about it. ...

"However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I am doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety; until-flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground" (Watson, 1968, pp. 50-51).

As Cook Ting skillfully and gracefully cuts the ox apart, he surely distinguishes between spaces and joints, but his mind does not fixate on this difference. In being fully attuned to the task of cutting the ox, Cook Ting is propellled by te: His knife finds its way skillfully between the animal's joints and the ox falls apart effortlessly.

Te, as illustrated by the story of Cook Ting, imbues an individual's action with an inflate power or effectiveness. The individual endowed with te can therefore, according to the Chuang-tzu, achieve great results naturally and spontaneously with minimal effort.

In a sense, all the characteristics of the Sage we have delineated are reflections of te: they empower the Sage with sagacity. When these characteristics are present in the practice of conscious camerawork, they can empower the photographer with photographic sagacity-creative mastery.

In its precise Taoist meaning, te (virtue/power) is a concept or experience rarely described by photographers. Nevertheless, glimpses of it can be found scattered about in the photography literature. In the following passage, for example, Doisneau (1992) describes an experience reminiscent of Cook Ting cutting up an ox:

There is that moment when we are truly visionary. There, everything works tremendously well [italics added]. But all this is only a part of that great game that puts us into a trance, into a state of receptivity. This trance doesn't last long, however, because life always calls you back to its commands. There are always contingencies. But somehow, despite it all, the effect does last. I think that it could be classed as a feeling. For me it is a kind of "religion of looking" (p, 80).

Another passage that can be viewed as an experience of te is found in the words of George DeWolfe (1995) when he defines the emotion stirred by capturing a "mean-
ingful experience" in a photograph: "The emotion is one of great humility—and great interior power, of being one with the world" (p. 3). Recall, too, the words of Cartier-Bresson (1988), mentioned earlier in the section about the self: "First you must lose your self. Then it happens" (p. 94). The "if" alluded to by Cartier-Bresson could be taken to be a reflection of te (power). That is, when the sense of self does not clutter perception, the practice of the liberated photographer is transformed and, in this case, charged with spontaneous creative power.

CONCLUSION

We have illustrated how the characteristics of sagehood as described in the Chuang-tzu can sometimes be found in creative photographers' descriptions of their art. Having made the case for this similitude, however, we must now temper it with some qualifications about the degree and prevalence of the resemblance.

To begin with, the descriptions and passages we have quoted from the photography literature are selective. If they give the impression that most professional or successful photographers are taoistic, alas, this is hardly so. Renowned photographers can be controlling, self-absorbed, goal-oriented, entangled by technique, attached to a particular photographic style, or unreceptive to alternative photographic visions. Constricted photographers may be quite successful in their profession, inasmuch as success is so often measured by sales and public exposure (e.g., fashion photography).

Thus we feel compelled to qualify our assertions by stating that it is only some photographers who sometimes express their artistic creativity in words that appear to parallel the principles of sagehood expressed in the Chuang-tzu. Nor do we claim that any given photographer expressing taoistic themes is necessarily consciously aware of them or of their implementation; nor do we suppose that such a photographer demonstrates them consistently in every photograph or in daily living.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, we remain impressed by the degree of resemblance sometimes found between the Sage in the Chuang-tzu and some creative photographers. Given that few, if any, of the photographers were likely to be conversant with a Taoist text like the Chuang-tzu, or even its more widely known "companion" text, the Lao-tzu, what could be responsible for the similitude? Is there something about creative photography that is perforce aligned with the principles of sagehood depicted in the Chuang-tzu?

There is at least one feature, characteristic of most forms of photography, that constitutes a conspicuous link between the art of photography and the Chuang-tzu. Marc Ribond (1994) states: "Taking pictures is savoring life every hundredth of a second" (p. 71). Ken Ruth (1993) elaborates: "For the camera, the creative moment is brief—a compelling, ephemeral collision of event and artist. Extreme awareness combined with unobtrusiveness becomes the context the photographer must work within" (p. 46). Cartier-Bresson (1952) speaks of the "decisive moment" in photography. Many other photographers also call attention to the brevity of the crucial artistic moment when a photograph is snapped.
In other art forms, unlike photography, the artist usually has more control over the period of time in which a work of art is created. Much of creative photography, however, necessitates cultivating ongoing conscious camerawork in order to instantaneously and creatively capture a photographic moment. The creative photographer must therefore not only master the art of photography but the art of mindfulness as well—a moment by moment receptive awareness of one’s surroundings (Gross & Shapiro, in press). In Taoist terms, the photographer must remain attuned to the ceaseless transformations of nature, of all existence.

To mine this boundless march of potential photographic moments, the creative photographer must align himself or herself with the Tao. How can this be accomplished? The most direct approach to apprehend the Tao is simply to plunge into it—in the words of the *Chuang-tzu*, “Leap into the boundless and make it your home” (Watson, 1968, p. 49). Perhaps a more gradual and more easily accessible approach is also possible. In order to photograph in the moment, as well as artistically, a creative photographer is likely to have assimilated at least some of the principles of sagehood described in the *Chuang-tzu*. Thus, a natural affinity between the art of sagehood and the art of photography can be considered to already exist, and can be developed further. This leads us to conclude that the *Chuang-tzu* could be useful as an instructional manual for teaching creative photography.

The *Chuang-tzu*, composed some 2,000 years ago, was certainly not addressed to photography, but because creative photography is intimately linked to a moment by moment awareness of ongoing change and transformation, the *Chuang-tzu* may well serve as a guide to cultivating a recognition of the ever-changing process of existence. To achieve an “immersive fluency” with the process of ceaseless change, the creative photographer’s life must to some degree become taoistically aligned, attuned to the ongoing changes of the universe as a whole. What better means to achieve this alignment than by directly becoming acquainted with the principles of sagehood in the *Chuang-tzu* and consciously attempting to incorporate them in one’s camera work? Although a forced pursuit of either a direct or gradual path, especially when egoistically motivated, is not likely to succeed, such an explicit practice may better serve to cultivate photographic artistry.

Thus, whether or not taoistic camerawork is the most expedient or dependable way to assure quick, conventional success, we believe that taoistic camerawork can certainly contribute to elevating photographic artistry. Moreover, taoistic camerawork is also likely to enhance spiritual understanding. Which, like artistry, depends largely upon an individual’s ability to engage life with a receptive mind and unconstricted awareness.

Although we feel there is a special connection between the principles of sagehood and creative photography due to the necessarily fleeting quality inherent in the execution of a photograph, we would not set the art of photography apart from all the other arts in its capacity to evoke the transpersonal dimension. Garrett White (1992), voicing Yasu Suzuka’s approach to photography, states, “Time must be stopped in order to show eternity in one moment” (p. 38). But the potential to evoke eternity has long been recognized in the arts. As Wilber has recently written: “Great art suspends … we enter with it into the timeless present” (p. 90). In his posthumously
published journals, Maslow (1979) speculated that the experience of feeling moved by beauty, whatever its source, might ultimately be responsible for both the peak and the plateau experience because both experiences can elicit the quality of eternalness (p. 1278).

Thus, photography shares with other arts the capacity for evoking the transpersonal dimension of a larger universe, by such means as grasping the constructive nature of reality (Gross, 1996), generating a breathless moment of eternity, inducing a deep state of mindfulness, or sweeping away the self through a sense of awe.

Although the Chuang-tzu can even serve as a manual for the art of creative photography, this ancient Taoist wisdom text remains foremost an invaluable guide to the art of living for photographers and nonphotographers alike.

NOTES


"Scholars often refer to this collection of writings as the Chuang-tzu because uncertainties remain not only about the dates of the work, but as to the actual authors, as well.

"To this end, it uses various forms of incongruity such as monsters, unexpected figures, self-contradiction, paradoxes, puns and jokes, and myths and metaphors (see Gross & Shapiro, 1994).

The list of characteristics has been slightly modified from an earlier study (Gross & Shapiro, 1993). We recognize that it is possible to construct other schemata as well.

5 Wu-wei and te are often presented in English commentaries simply by their Chinese names, a practice followed in the present study.

6 To distinguish photographers from other sources, when a photographer's name first appears in the text, we include the first name.

7 Another characterization of the concept of conscious camerawork is Cartier-Bresson's (1992) definition of photography as placing "head, heart, and eye along the same line of sight" (p. 333). This definition calls for fresh perception and total presence on the part of the photographer while engaged in camerawork.

Although the Chuang-tzu distinguishes between Little Understanding and Great Understanding, the mind of the Sage is perhaps best described as a harmonious companionship between the two.

9 It is difficult to distinguish sometimes what precise meaning the term "emotion" has when used by various photographers. When emotional behavior overly influences action or "feeds one's ego," it would appear to conflict with the sage-like behavior in the Chuang-tzu.

10 A translation of the Chinese term tzu-jan which, more literally, means "being so of itself" (Graham, 1989, p. 190).

11 We prefer the term "taoistic" photographer or photography to "Taoist" so as not to imply that making use of some sage-like principles is necessarily equivalent to being a Taoist Sage.

12 "Freaks" in Arbus' work encompasses outcasts, pariahs, or misfits, and includes "the citizens of the sexual underworld as well as the genetic freaks" (Sontag, 1989, p. 36).

But deliberately seeking after excitement would not be in accord with Taoist sagehood.
Westerbeck and Meyerowitz (1994) report that Cartier-Bresson's favorite book has been Herrigel's Zen in the Art of Archery (1953), which served to "illuminate behavior he had already adopted" (p. 165). Considering some of the similarities between Taoism and Zen Buddhism, it is likely that Cartier-Bresson would have found himself attracted to the *Chuang-tzu* as well.

Although the principles of the surrealist movement are dissimilar to Taoism in many ways, they share some similar concepts such as the constructive nature of reality, free and easy wandering, and openness to life.

(1989) points out that the Confucians and Mohists generally equated *te* with virtue, whereas Taoist expositions usually contained some connotations of "power" (p. 124).

15 Although the principles of the surrealist movement are dissimilar to Taoism in many ways, they share some similar concepts such as the constructive nature of reality, free and easy wandering, and openness to life.

By which he means:

We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it (Cartier-Bresson, 1952, unpaginated).

The concept of the decisive moment, however, has been under debate (see Westerbeck & Meyerowitz, 1994). Among some of the criticisms of the concept is that it has become an overused concept for photojournalists aiming to emulate Cartier-Bresson's work. Some photographers believe there is no such thing as a decisive moment; each and every moment is a decisive moment. Others, like Salgado, rather than seeing an image building to a visual climax, see a series of moments on a parabola with many tangents; each tangent important and telling a story (S. Salgado, personal communication. August 29, 1996).

(aWe are presently preparing a course to teach based on this assumption.

17 The *Chuang-tzu* reveals very little explicitly about actual methods which might be used to grasp the Tao, probably because a determined, willful attempt by a direct "leap into the boundless" or by mimicking the principles of sagehood, is likely to prove elusive, if not self-defeating.

Walter (1996) also states, "All superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away" (p. 89). We note in speaking about the precise moment of mastering an image, Cartier-Bresson (1992) writes, "To photograph is to hold one's breath" (p. 333). The *Chuang-tzu* itself states: "So it is said, you have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world. The sage never ceases to value oneness" (Watson, 1968, p. 236).

REFERENCES


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