

THE STORY OF MY PHOTOGRAPHY

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Some of you like my photography and I often am asked how I got into it. How I began mixing my mind with photography was not intentional. It just happened, and here is the story:

At that particular time in my life I had just lost my job as a consultant in which I had been involved in for some years, due to layoffs and downsizing. I literally had nothing I had to do. Suddenly here I was with no job and only time on my hands. Of course, I was in shock. Through all of this something inside me somehow broke and I was just out on my own as I had not been since I was very young. I had no schedule of any kind.

I soon found myself walking alone at dawn in the meadows and forests, just soaking it in. I believe I was out at sunrise (unless there was serious rain) every day for something like six months straight. And I took along my camera, more as an excuse to go out in nature than anything real. And I started using it again.

It was a chaotic time in my life, a time when much of my outside world was failing me in some important ways. Without a thought, I found myself looking inward through a lens at a world I could not (or seldom bothered) to see on my own. My outside world was shutting down and the camera lens became a keyhole to another, and for me, better world. As mentioned, I looked without thinking. And I looked a lot.

I have always loved nature and know a lot about critters of all sizes, so pretty soon I was doing close-up and macro work, and that took time and patience. Without meaning to, I was out there crawling in the wet grass at dawn, soaking wet, focusing and concentrating with extreme precision for long periods of time. I was soon spending hours each day like this.

Only, unlike my meditation practice, I had no mental baggage. I had no hopes or fears, no arrogance or expectations, and no spiritual agenda. And I had no ties at work to distract me. I had no work. My family was perhaps worried about me, but aside from giving me some odd looks, they more-or-less left me alone. They knew I was suffering. I was totally there in the moment, because I had nothing else to do and nowhere else to be – no attachments. Perhaps best of all, I had no agenda whatsoever. I could feel I was changing, but for a long time I did not know what those changes were.

All of the meditation texts and legendary dharma sources talk about seeking out a place of solitude to practice. Since I live in a city, there was not much solitude around, no mountain peaks or caves. But I soon learned that solitude is not measured only by distance from people and cities. It can be measured whenever we lose our attachments to this world. I had not voluntarily done this, but when my job vanished, I was plunged into a kind of solitude I had

never known.

I might as well have been on a mountain peak because there was no consolation from friends and family that I would allow. I could have been in a hidden cave, so cut off did I feel. Yet I did not think of this as being 'in solitude' and certainly did not welcome it, but it happened anyway and suddenly there I was, all by myself. Of course, in hindsight this was a good thing, but at the time I just felt totally on my own and it was uncomfortable, to say the least.

Now the photography thing is going to be a little difficult to explain because what happened is subtle. I soon found that I was not concerned with the results (the photos) I was taking, but rather with the process of focus and concentration I had to go through to take them. This is key.

I even joined some lens and photo-gear sites on the web and found out that my not-being-concerned with the resulting photos, but rather with the process, made me very different from other photographers, and they did not grasp what I was doing IMO. What was I doing?

What I was doing was learning meditation very easily, rather than with great difficulty as I had been doing for thirty years or so. And I didn't even know this was what I was doing. I was that engrossed in the whole process of macro photography.

I was not that interested in the resulting photos because it was the process of taking those photos that was the meditation and it was in that process that I found peace of mind and clarity. It was the many hours of setting up the camera and tripod, photographing the subject, waiting for the light, for the wind to die down, etc.

I had somewhere (way-back-then) bought into the idea that meditation was somehow supposed to be "spiritual," whatever that meant, and my spiritual fears and expectations (or whatever) had managed to cloud up the very practical nature of learning meditation. There is nothing "spiritual" about meditation, if by spiritual we mean otherworldly or somehow on another plane. There is only one plane for all of us, but different levels of awareness. After all, the word "Buddha" simply means awareness or the 'one who is aware'. Awareness is not spiritual in any 'other-worldly' sense, but just what it says, "aware."

I was finding liberation by looking through a lens, peering into tiny worlds of perfection that cannot be seen with the naked eye. With sitting meditation, we can focus on a pebble and let the mind rest there. The object of meditation practice can be anything or nothing. There is also formless meditation.

Anyway, the many, many hours of extreme concentration focusing through a lens brought increased clarity to my mind. Before I knew it I was depending on my daily photographic sessions just to keep my mind clear. I was hooked. I did not understand what was happening enough to explain it to myself, much less to other people, even to my own family.

Lucky for me I have as a close friend, Lama Karma Drodhul, a Tibetan monk who we consider

like a son, a member of our family. When I explained to Lama Karma what was happening to me, he knew just what had happened. He said I had found the 'Lama of Appearances'. It seems that nature herself, the world of appearances, can also be a perfect teacher, and I had been learning meditation from nature herself. This made good sense, and I instantly flashed on what had happened. I had finally learned to meditate properly. It is a little more complex than this, but this will have to do for now. I have two books for those who want a blow-by-blow description of each step here:

<http://macrostop.com/>

Their titles are "The Lama of Appearances" and "Experiences with Mahamudra."

THE STORY OF MY PHOTOGRAPHY: Part 2

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Continuing with how I got involved with photography, to be clear, I was not just taking single photos. I became somewhat expert in a technique called Focus Stacking, and ended up writing a few books and scores of articles/posts on the topic. Focus stacking is a very tedious technique where multiple photos are taken of a subject, from the front to the rear, each in sharp focus, and then combined into a single photo where the subject appears to be perfectly in focus, or as much in focus as the artist/photographer wishes. There are often 100 or more photos taken of, say, a flower, and these are then combined into a single result. This is a time consuming and painfully slow process, but it can give beautiful results.

Speaking of results, although I concentrated on the process of photography and not the results, my resulting photos did gradually get better. Eventually I was even invited to be the mentor for the close-up/macro forum for Nikongear.com, a site consisting mostly of professional photographers, and what I consider the most useful lens site on the Internet.

The long and the short of this story is that perhaps serendipitously I had created the right conditions to learn meditation properly. My mind was clear of any expectations or hope. I was not "trying" to meditate as I had for many years, with all the mental baggage that brings. Instead, I was simply concentrating my focus on an object whole-heartedly, and when distracted, I sincerely brought my mind back to the task at hand. And I loved it and was doing this whole process for hours each day.

I have given you the basic idea. What is harder to convey is my realization that meditation as I was now learning it was nothing like the 'spiritual' idea of meditation I got out of books, etc. All of my so-called previous spiritual expectations were not real. I made them up somehow or bought into other's descriptions. My whole take on enlightenment, elevated consciousness, and 'spirituality' was bogus, and just unreal.

The actual experience of meditation was nothing but real common sense, practical, and being immediately present. All of the other stuff I had been imagining should be taking place with a

successful meditation practice was just my imagination, expectations based on no actual experience – guesses, and bad ones at that. It was these phony expectations that had stood between me and really meditating all those years. Even though I did not know meditation, I had already set up some kind of criteria to gauge it by, all of which were simply not true. What a surprise!

Meditation is the most basic reality life offers, the most crystal-clear, down-to-earth, practical awareness possible. There is nothing 'special' or spiritual about meditation other than the clarity it brings to the mind. If clarity and awareness is spiritual, then meditation is spiritual.

After some thirty years of meditation practice, I finally had learned something about what meditation really was about. As embarrassing as this is to relate, I am so grateful for the opportunity to have experienced it firsthand. And, for me, this happened not on the cushion, where I had been not-so-patiently sitting for years, but out in the wilds of the early morning dawn. Who would have guessed it?

So my meditation process continues and the resulting photos that I post here are what remain from that process. Do my photos reflect the meditation process? You will have to be the judge of that. For me they are the result of that process and it continues today.

I write this that it may be of benefit for those of you looking for a way into meditation other than the standard route. For me it was through close-up photography. What about you?