

**ZEN  
PHOTOGRAPHY**

# PREFACE

Dear friend,

If you've ever felt frustration, anger, or anxiety when it comes to your photography, this book is for you. Personally, I've felt a lot of envy, jealousy, and negative emotions in photography. Photography became less about expressing my inner-spirit, and more about impressing others.

Through my personal photographic journey, I've learned how to "Zen out" in my photography. For me, photography has become less about making photos, and more about finding inner-calm, peace, and tranquility.

This book is an attempt for me to share some of my personal Zen philosophies when it comes to photography and life, and to provide some useful tips or insights, which I hope can help you in your personal journey.

Always,

Eric



1  
DON'T FORCE IT

The first practical piece of advice for you is this: don't force your photography. Don't force yourself to make photos if you don't feel like it. The more pressure you put on yourself, the worse the photos you're going to make.

Do you force a child to play on the jungle gym? Do you force a dog to wag its tail? Do you force a waterfall to flow water?

Photography is an act to express your inner-creative spirit. Photography is an opportunity for you to find appreciation, love, and peace in your life. Photography is a personal endeavor to you. So why stress out about how many 'likes' you will get on social media, or what others think about your work?

Don't fear that people will forget about you if you don't always shoot, share photos, and comment on the photos of others.

Often one of the best ways to re-inspire in your photography is to withdraw, and to re-emerge later, without forcing it.



2

SEEK SIMPLICITY

In today's world, we are always trying to make things more complicated than they need to be.

Rather, seek 'optimal simplicity' in your photography and your life. Think about all the superfluous things you can remove from your photographic life.

For example, is your camera and lens simple enough for your needs? Do you earn enough money at your job to have a simple and carefree life? Are all your needs met? Or do you need more?

When it comes to photographic composition, seek to make simpler compositions. Don't try to force yourself to make visual gymnastics out of your images. The more complex and complicated you try to make your photos, the less genuine they will be. Not only that, but you will just end up confusing your viewer.

Seek emotional complexity and depth in your photos; but simple compositions. Often the simple photos are the most difficult to shoot.



3

## CARVE AWAY THE SUPERFLUOUS

When you're photographing a scene, think of yourself as a surgeon. You have a scalpel, and you're trying to cut away the cancer or the tumor of the scene. You're trying to cut away the inessential -- and what hurts the scene.

Or you can think of yourself as a sculptor. You create art through subtraction. You chip away the superfluous, only to uncover the hidden statue within.

In life, there is so much clutter in the world. There are many distractions, and things that take our focus away from what is truly important in life -- our loved ones, friends, and what is personally-meaningful to us.

So similarly, try to reduce complexity and clutter in your photos. When you're photographing a scene, focus on the edges of a scene, and try to make the edges as clean as possible. Try to make the background as simple as possible.

A simple tip: start off with a simple white or monochromatic background. Then slowly add things into the scene.

Or start off with a complex scene, and seek to remove things from the frame, until you only have what is essential.





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## WALKING MEDITATION

When it comes to photography, I treat it to walking meditation. I just go on a walk with my camera, and walk slowly. I treat photography as a chance to get out of my apartment, to see the neighborhood, to hear the birds chirping, the cars honking, the people chattering, and to feel connected with society.

Don't think of photography just about making photos. It is something deeper. It is connecting yourself with the environment

around you, the society around you, and with the world around you.

As a tip, try to walk slower than you normally do. With each step, feel the concrete under your sole. With each step, look around you. Look left, right, down, and up. Try to be more curious with your eyes. Stare at things you might have not stared at before. Treat yourself like a child, walking in the streets for the first time.



5

## BEAUTY IN THE MUNDANE

Photography isn't about photographing the extreme, outrageous, and the extravagant. Rather, photography is all about finding beauty in the mundane, or the ordinary.

In practical terms, try to photograph ordinary things, and make them look extraordinary. Don't just photograph the extraordinary in an ordinary way.

What are ordinary things in your life that you can photograph? Your coffee cup? Your own neighborhood? Your children, loved ones, or friends? The area where you work? Your desk? Your local cafe?

Photography is about finding more appreciation in the everyday and the ordinary. Seek to find beauty in the everyday and ordinary, and you will never be disappointed.



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## PHOTOGRAPHY AS A JOURNEY

This is a bit trite to say, but photography is a journey. There is no final destination. Once you've reached your "final destination" in photography, you have died.

Photography is about enjoying the journey. About learning every step of the way. About sharing your joy with others. Photography is about sharing your insights and tips with other pho-

tographers. Photography is about connecting with other people.

In my personal photography journey, whenever I thought I had things “figured out”-- that is when I started to die creatively. I lost that child-like innocence, of curiosity and experimentation. I became an “expert”, and to the mind of the expert, there are few possibilities.

Enjoy every photograph of the way. And a photography project is always the most fun while you're working on it, not when you complete it. Just like a hiker-- the hike up the mountain is always more enjoyable than enjoying the view from the top.



7

## THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND CAMERA AS ONE

There is no “perfect” camera out there. Rather, seek the simplest possible camera for your needs. For me, that means the lightest, smallest, and the most compact camera. It means the camera with the fewest functions, buttons, and superfluous dials. I just want a simple point-and-shoot camera, where I don’t need to think when I hit the shutter.

You want to become one with your camera. You want your camera to become integrated with you. You want the least amount of friction between seeing a scene, and clicking the shutter of your camera.

Therefore the optimal camera for you might be a point and shoot camera, a smartphone, or some sort of bigger camera. It doesn't really matter. Not only that, but seek to use the simplest possible technical settings to achieve your ideal image. You don't need to shoot fully manual.

So for many photographers (myself included), that might mean using autofocus, auto-exposure, and auto-aperture/shutter-speed. Use all of your mental energy and focus to be in the "zone" when shooting, and to focus on your composition and framing instead.





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## DON'T THINK

When you're making photos, you want to shut off your brain. Only use your brain when you're looking through your photos, and deciding which are your best photos to keep.

When I'm shooting in the streets, the more I think, the worse my photos are. It is best to shoot from the gut. To trust the intelligence of your body. To shoot from your heart, not your brain.

Photography doesn't need to be complicated. Keep it simple. Think of yourself like a child with the camera for the first time. Children don't censor themselves. Rather, the child treats photography like playing. And children play for the sake of it.

So treat your photography the same. Shoot for the sake of it. Don't worry about making good photos. Rather, focus on the process of shooting, and how it makes your soul feel -- calm, elated, relaxed, and in-control or your destiny.



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## PHOTOGRAPHY IS SELF-THERAPY

For me, photography is self-therapy. I remember when I used to work a 9-5 job, I would just go out to take photos to relieve my stress from work. I would also enjoy the added bonus of just going for a walk, and getting some fresh air.

Not only that, but photography has helped me become more social. Photography has given me a reason to interact with strangers. Photography has given me a reason to meet other

photographers, and share my passion with them. Photography has also afforded me an opportunity to share my learnings about photography with others.

Photography should be removing stress and anxiety from your life -- rather than adding stress and anxiety to your life. If your photography isn't making your life less stressful, you're doing something wrong. Seek your photography as self-therapy, for your mind, body, and soul.



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**DON'T SEEK TO PLEASE  
OTHERS**

For me, one of the biggest sources of dissatisfaction in my photography is having a need to impress others. Even today, I still get a huge ego boost when others tell me that they like my photos. When others don't like my photos, or just say nothing, I feel pretty shitty about myself.

The secret that has helped me -- share fewer of your photos, and really ask yourself, "Do I like my own photos?"

Who cares whether others like your photos, if you yourself don't like your own photos?

So as a practical tip, let your photos sit and "marinate" for a long time, before sharing them. If you are unsure about your photos, wait a week, a month, or sometimes even a year before sharing them. The longer I usually let my photos sit, the more clarity I gain. Certain photos get better over time, and certain photos get worse over time (according to my personal standards).

Therefore first seek to please yourself, before pleasing others. Because if you have a photograph that you personally dislike, but millions love it, would you be happy?



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## BEGINNER'S MIND

In Zen, they call it “beginner’s mind” or “child’s mind.” The concept is that whenever you start something new, the opportunities and possibilities are infinite. However the more experienced you become, and the more of an “expert” you become, the fewer possibilities you have. You set more limitations on yourself, which ultimately end up hurting you. You lose your innocent sense of curiosity and play, and you become “serious”

in your photography. And over time, your photos become less playful, more forceful, and less natural and authentic.

Always seek to be a beginner. For me, whenever I wake up in the morning, I try to pretend like it is the first time I'm waking up. Even though my daily routine tends to be pretty regular (wake up, have a coffee, do some writing, go for a walk, drink more coffee, meet friends, have dinner, and sleep) -- I try to treat each experience as a brand new experience.

That means don't listen to any conventional wisdom. Rather, seek the "truth" for yourself. Don't learn photographic theories and try to follow them. Rather, be a "tinkerer", and learn through trial-and-error. And based on what you learn from your own experiments, formulate your own personal theories. And once you formulate your own theories, compare it to the theories of others.

And when you feel you've become too much of an "expert" and you no longer have fun in your photography, refresh. Start all over again. Sell all your cameras, equipment, and think to yourself: "If I started off photography all over again today, what would I do, and what would I *not* do?"



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KILL YOUR MASTERS



When I first started photography and was a beginner, I wanted to learn from the masters of photography. I would be at these fancy art exhibitions, and I would always hear other photographers “name drop” other famous photographers. I nodded my head, and pretended like I knew who they were talking about. But in reality, I had no idea.

Having never gone to art school or photography school, I wanted to learn for myself.

Therefore I started to write a series of articles on master photographers (both from the past, and contemporary) to learn their “secret sauce.” I wanted to find out their personal philosophies, techniques, and tips when it came to photography.

In the beginning, this knowledge empowered me. I learned to dispel all these myths about photography. For example, I learned the ‘myth of the decisive moment’ (I used to think that you should only get a good photo in 1 photograph, but later I realized the master photographers would often shoot 10, 20, 30, or even more photos of the same scene, to get one good shot). I learned that great photography wasn’t about shooting great photos, but about *not* showing your bad photos (the importance of image selection). Not only that, but I also learned that the more successful you became as a photographer, you didn’t become any happier (if anything, most “famous” photogra-

phers I've met are the most miserable, because they're always comparing themselves to other photographers even richer and more successful than them).

Not only that, but the more knowledge I accumulated about the master photographers, the more blocked I became creatively. I started to overthink my photography. I thought too much about photo theory; instead of just shooting photos.

Therefore I started to learn how to “kill my masters” in photography, and to slowly “unlearn” what I've learned in the past. Now I'm trying to empty my mind, and become as much of a child photographer as possible. To become pure, unobstructed with rules, and to just have fun.

My practical advice is this: learn from the masters when you're starting off, and then once you feel like you've learned what you've needed to learn, proceed to *unlearn*, and to kill your masters.

Like the Zen monks say, if you see the Buddha walking in the streets, kill him.



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## CONSTANT REFINEMENT

Perfection doesn't exist in photography. Rather, you are trying to constantly refine yourself. To make yourself a little less imperfect everyday.

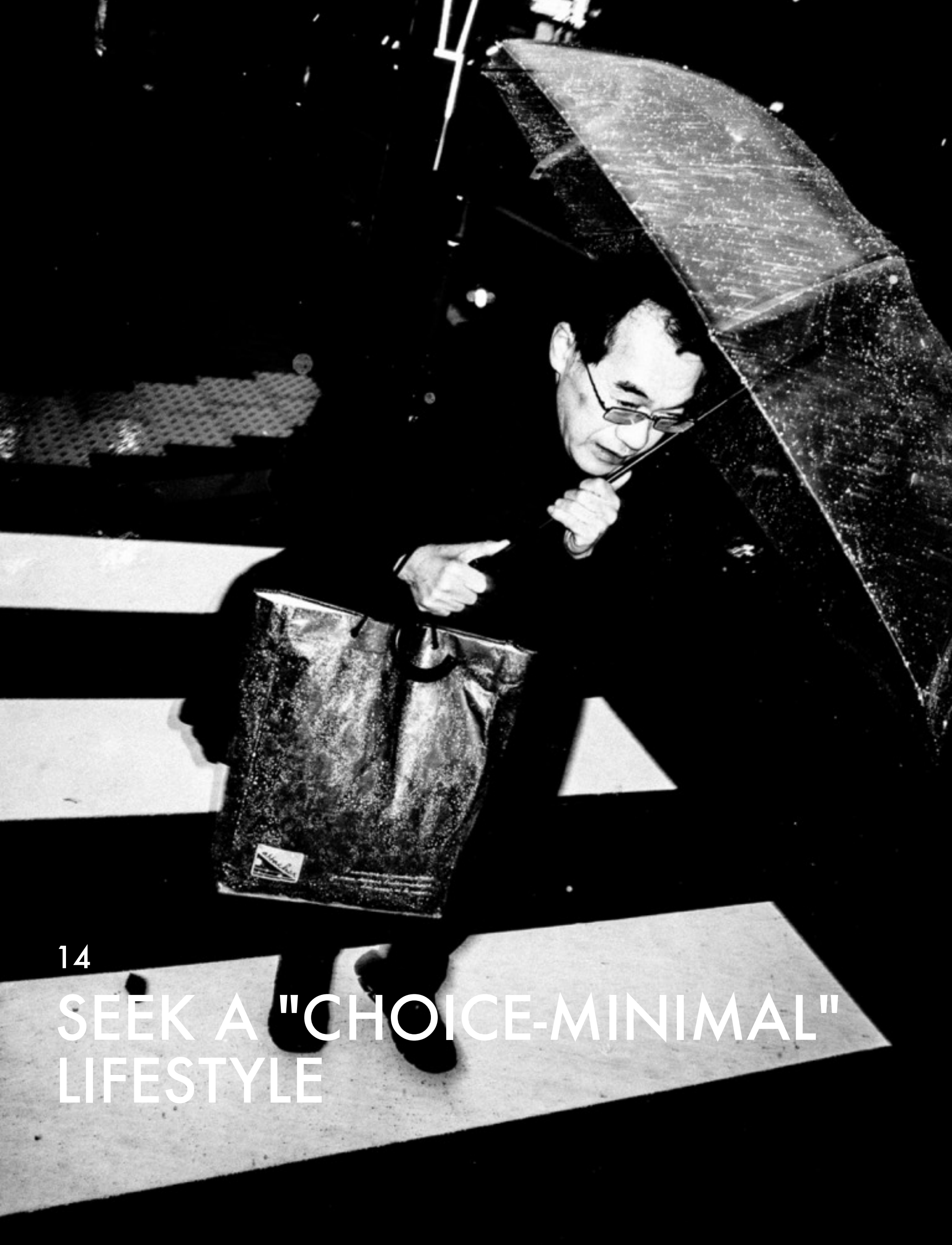
That means everyday, trying to remove some of your flaws in your photos. That can mean when you're shooting in the streets, seek to make simpler photos everyday. Make your pho-

tos less complicated and less complex everyday. Seek to have fewer distractions in your photos everyday.

That might also mean to try to share fewer photos as time goes on. To only show what you consider is your best. Or perhaps to delete or remove your old photos from the past.

Perfection doesn't exist, but I feel we can all strive for constant refinement. A good way to think about it is the "1% rule" -- to improve yourself 1% everyday. Or better yet, see to remove 1% of your faults everyday.

You will never reach perfection, but why not seek it?



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SEEK A "CHOICE-MINIMAL"  
LIFESTYLE

In life, we have too many choices. We have too many choices when it comes to choosing our clothes. When it comes to choosing our devices. When it comes to choosing our cars, homes, and appliances.

We are bombarded with choices in terms of models, features, functions, colors, and superfluous details.

In life, I try to seek simplification in this world where I am afflicted with the “tyranny of choice.” Therefore in my wardrobe, I try to wear “all black everything” -- black shirt, black pants, black shoes. Everyday I wear the same thing, which means less stress and “paralysis by analysis” in choosing my wardrobe. That means more creative energy to do what is really important to me-- writing, reading, meditating, and photographing.

You can seek minimalism in choices in many ways.

For example, if you are overwhelmed with your camera equipment, purge everything and just stick with one camera and one lens. If that is too difficult for you, just try to stick with one camera and one lens for a week.

For me, having just one camera and one lens means that I have less stress in terms of deciding which camera to shoot with for the day. And the more I stick with one camera and one

lens, the more creative I get with my equipment. I learn the limitations of my equipment, and then I use my own creativity and ingenuity to overcome these limitations.

I do believe that true creativity is through limits. “Creative constraints” -- we will talk about that later.

What are other ways you can have a “choice-minimal” lifestyle?

Perhaps that means always drinking coffee at the same coffee shop. Always having the same meals. Always shooting in the same areas. Always meeting the same people.

In today’s world, we are always told to have a variety of everything. But after a while, seeking variety and novelty can be exhausting. It is just a distraction.

The fewer choices you have to make about the small details, the more energy you can have for the truly important choices in your life.





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## "CREATIVE CONSTRAINTS"

Creativity is all about constraints.

I love the haiku-- a minimalist poetry structure, where you are forced to only have a certain amount of words, syllables, and line in the poem.

Rather than being restrictive in a negative way, the constraint become positive. You are forced to innovate within those limitations.

For example, if you were forced to only use one camera and one lens, only one aesthetic (either only black and white or color), and one area -- how could you use your own creativity to make the best out of what you have?

When I was a child, I was the most creative when I didn't have any toys. The whole world became my playground. I turned the TV-box into a spaceship. I drew drawings on blank pieces of paper. I created my own parachutes for my army soldiers with plastic bags at home.

Give yourself creative constraints, whether that be time, monetary, or artistic-- and you will truly flourish.



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## JUST 1

If you were remembered for just 1 photograph before you died, what would that 1 photograph be? If you could be remembered for 1 photography project before you died, what would that 1 project be?

We are always seeking to create more. To share more. To innovate more.

But what if the secret was to have less? To create less? To share less?

When in doubt, 1 is the ultimate number. Just seek 1 of everything. 1 camera, 1 lens. 1 photography book to find inspiration from. 1 place you like to travel to. 1 photographer who you derive inspiration from.

I believe that quality is about depth over breadth. Why know many things superficially, when you can know a few very well?



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## MUTE DISTRACTIONS

Today's world is distracting. Our phones are always vibrating with notifications, emails, text messages, and phone calls. We cannot do anything without getting interrupted. Technology hasn't made this any better, it has made it worse.

How can you really focus and do any creative work if you're constantly overwhelmed with distractions? You can't.

The best way to focus is to remove distractions. That means to uninstall distracting apps from your phone. That means installing extensions on your browser that block advertisements, and even distracting websites. That means turning off your phone or internet when you don't need it.

When you're shooting on the streets, you want to be in the moment. You don't want to think about the past, or the future. You want to remain in the "eternal now."

So when you're out taking photos, don't listen to music. Don't text on your phone. Don't check social media. Rather, turn your phone to silent mode, turn it to airplane mode, or turn it off completely.

Not only that, but don't think about your life problems. Rather, focus just on your photography, and let yourself disappear into the moment of shooting.



18

## DON'T TRAVEL FAR FROM HOME

Why is it that we always want to travel and see the world? Is it thinking that by seeing the exotic, we will be more “inspired” and take better photos?

This is what I thought. I always was dissatisfied with my home, and thought by traveling overseas, I would make better photos.

In reality, when I traveled abroad, I just ended up taking torusity photos. I got “suckered by the exotic” as my teacher Constan-

tine Manos once taught me. I took the same “National Geographic-esque” images I saw in magazines. I didn’t innovate. I didn’t know the culture. It wasn’t personal to me. I just took visually-interesting photos of the exotic, not the personal.

I’ve discovered that the best photos you shoot are the personal ones. Where you can see a bit of your emotion and soul in your photos. Where you are the only one who could have taken that photograph.

Therefore if you want to make more personally-meaningful photos, don’t travel far from home. Photograph your loved ones. Photograph your friends, kids, and co-workers. Photograph in your office, in your home, or at your local cafe.

If you don’t need to travel, or don’t desire to travel-- think of how much money, time, and energy you will save. And if you are happy with your simple and modest home and neighborhood, what further Zen or happiness is there?

Contentment is the true happiness, not novelty of traveling.





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# ULTRALIGHT

I don't want to discourage you from traveling. I think travel is a great way to see the world, to expand your mind about other cultures, and to become more open-minded.

While traveling isn't always the best for photography, do it anyway.

And when you do travel, my suggestion: seek to be as "ultra-light" as possible. Pack fewer things that you think you need.

My suggestion when you're traveling, don't pack anything that is cotton. Seek synthetic materials, that dry quickly. And you don't need more than 2 pair of anything. Every night, wash your clothes in the sink with shampoo or soap, stomp it with a towel, and hang-dry it.

Not only that, but travel with fewer gadgets, cameras, and things than you think you need to. Just have a single bag or backpack. The lighter you travel, the further you can walk without fatigue. The fewer devices you bring, the fewer things you need to stress about plugging in and charging.

The idea of being "ultralight" can also apply to living at home, or also emotional and mentally.

When you're living at home, don't seek to own things that physically, emotionally, or spiritually weigh you down. Don't have excess.

Not only that, but seek to be “ultralight” in terms of your mental health. Don’t regret the heaviness of the past. Rather, learn from your mistakes in the past, and endeavor to no longer make the same mistakes. Think positively towards the present and the future.

Cut anything and everything that might weigh you down. Cut down superfluous possessions, negative people, negative friends, negative family, or negative emotions.

Seek to become “ultralight”, and you will soar to the stars.



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## SLOW DOWN

Today's world is addicted to speed. We are addicted to fast internet speeds. Fast service. Fast food. Fast sex. Fast devices.

To become more Zen in your photography and life is to slow down. To take your time. To appreciate the slowness and process of photography and life.

For example, don't always seek to quickly download and upload your photos online. Rather, learn how to let your photos sit and marinate a while before sharing them.

Don't walk too fast when you're shooting on the streets. Walk slower than you need to, and then you will notice more things that you might have ignored.

Slow down when it comes to socializing with your friends, family, and loved ones. Don't rush dinner. Take your time. Enjoy every bite of your meal, and savor the moment with those you love.

Don't rush your progress in photography. A great redwood tree starts off as a seedling, and grows steadily over centuries, and thousands of years. And over time, it eventually reaches a height close to the heavens.

Treat yourself the same. Seek steady improvement, rather than shortcuts and fast gains.

Anything fast tends to be dangerous. Fast cars lead to death. Fast profits tend to lead to dead companies. Fast photographers don't make good photos.

Whenever you feel rushed, stop, calm down, take a huge breath, and walk slowly.



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## HOW TO MINDFULLY SHARE PHOTOS

To become a Zen photographer doesn't mean to shut yourself up in a cave, and never interact with anybody else. Rather, it means to just be mindful when interacting with others.

For example, when it comes to social media -- it is neither good nor bad. It is just how you use it.

If you feel anxious and paranoid that your photos aren't getting as many "likes" on social media as you'd like, it is probably not

healthy for you. But if you are content with the few followers you have, and you are sharing photos that bring you true joy, then you are using social media in a positive way.

When in doubt, share fewer photos. Share your best.

Doesn't it annoy you when your friend uploads their 200 photos from Paris to social media? To me, that is information overload. I would have rather seen their 3-5 best photos, and moved on with my day.

So with social media, don't do unto others as you don't want others to do unto you.



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## THERE ARE NO "GOOD" OR "BAD" PHOTOS

In the West, we generally believe in “dualism” -- this concept of “good” vs “bad.” They call it “dualism” because reality is simplified into dual categories (good and bad).

In reality, there is no “good” or “bad.” Everything “good” has some “bad” in it (and vice-versa).



For example, is a spider “bad” for catching mosquitos? Is a mosquito “bad” for sucking blood from humans? Is a human “bad” for eating an innocent strawberry?

Similarly, in photography, there are no “good” or “bad” photos. Rather, I believe there are personal and non-personal photos.

So don’t worry whether your photos are “good” or “bad.” Rather, think whether your photos are meaningful, or not meaningful.

By focusing on meaningful vs non-meaningful photos, you are less concerned with what others think of your photos. Instead, you focus on making photos that fulfill your being and your soul. It makes photography a personal pursuit, rather than trying to please others.



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## BE FLEXIBLE LIKE BAMBOO

If there is a hurricane, the storm will uproot trees and other plants which are rigid. However the bamboo will survive, as it is flexible, and it will bend.

Seek to be bamboo. Be flexible. Don't have any hard-set rules or theories. Learn when to change your mind, and not be a slave of your past thoughts, opinions, and ideas.

For example, times are always changing. Life is constantly in flux. The world is changing, the economy is changing, and technology is (rapidly) changing.

In the past, photographers valued exhibitions, photo books, and “fine art.” Nowadays, photographers value smartphones, social media, and sharing photos online.

If you are rigid, and decide *not* to share any photos online (because you’re worried that people are “stealing” your photos), you’re going to die. Rather, we should seek to be flexible with technology and how society is changing.

But when do you seek to be rigid in your personal beliefs and ethics, and when to be flexible on the small details?

For me, have a few core beliefs, in terms of how you photograph and how you live your life. Don’t do anything that makes you feel “unethical” or wrong.

However be also open to changing your mind. If someone says something that contradicts what you believe in (but the other person is more ‘right’ in your opinion), don’t feel shame in changing your ideas or thoughts.

Allow your mind to be flexible to change. Don’t be rigid and stubborn.

For example, realize that everything you believe in to be “true” can also be “false” at the same time. This has to do with how you take photos, photographic technique, post-processing, image selection, working on projects, or wisdom from the masters. In studying the master photographers, what I’ve discovered is that to become a great photographer is to discover what works best for *you*.

Photography is a tool for self-discovery. What technique or tool works for others, will not work for you.

Therefore be flexible, and seek the truth for yourself. And never give up in your pursuit for the truth.



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## HOW TO KILL YOUR EGO

One of the biggest reasons we are reluctant to change is because of our ego. We think that by changing our opinion or admitting when we're wrong, we are somehow damaging this sense of "self."

But in reality, the self doesn't exist. The "ego" is just a concept that exists in our brains and mind. Your "self" or "ego" doesn't exist outside of you.

For example, when someone says that they don't like your photos, they aren't saying that they don't like you as a human being. They just are saying they don't like your photos.

That means detach yourself emotionally from your photos. Once you've made the photographs, they no longer belong to you. Your photos aren't attached to you.

By detaching your ego and your emotions from your photos, you will no longer feel pain when someone criticizes your photos, nor will you feel overly-elated when someone compliments or praises your photos.

Rather, look at your photos like someone else shot them. If so, would you still like the photos? How could you improve the photos, the composition, the layers, or the emotion in the photos?

Remember-- you are not your photos.



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## HOW TO LIBERATE OTHERS

Once you feel like you've reached some sort of "enlightenment" or self-knowledge about yourself, dedicate your life to helping liberate, uplift, and encouraging others. Help others find the truth for themselves.

That means not just shoving your own opinion or ideas down the throats of others. Rather, just learn for yourself, and figure out what works for you. Then share these ideas with others in

the form of “tips” or “advice” -- and allow people to take it or leave it.

For me, I have gained a lot more personal insight and “enlightenment” in my photography. I’ve discovered that photography is less about making good photos, and more about finding satisfaction and joy in my life. And I’ve also discovered that my true mission in life isn’t to become the world’s best photographer, but rather to help empower other photographers become the best versions of themselves.

So everyday, seek to find self-wisdom and self-knowledge in your photography. Once you’ve (somewhat) discovered what works for you, dedicate your entire energy, life, and attention to empowering those around you.





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# CONCLUSION

PORTRAIT BY JOSH WHITE

Dear friend,

There are no “conclusions” in life. Each step is just a step forward in our journey of life. Each step we are trying to learn what works for us, what doesn't work for us, to gain knowledge and wisdom, and to shed off the superfluous.

I know that my photography and life will always be in a state of flux. What I believe in today I won't believe in a year from now. And whatever I believe in as “truth” today will totally become bunk in the future.

Yet this is what makes life worth living. To change. To broaden your mind. To learn. And to share these learnings with others.

I hope this book helps you find some personal insight into your photography, and to also help you find more Zen in your life.

Always,

Eric

*Never stop learning: [erickimphotography.com/blog](http://erickimphotography.com/blog)*