

Hans Georg Berger

Photographing Meditation

My role in the meditation retreats of Luang Prabang was that of an artist-documentarian who, with his particular method and through photography and videography, accompanied the actions and life of the community of monks, their teaching to the novices, and, in particular, all features of their meditation practice. My method somehow reverses the usual roles of the photographer as the active, deciding component and of the portrayed as the largely passive component of the communication process codified by the camera, who usually has little choice and authority in the making of a picture. What I call "community involvement" genuinely relies on the knowledge and expertise of those portrayed, and liberally gives them the last word in a subtle, carefully orchestrated process of choice, discussion, and shared decision on the value and importance of the images produced: the photographer, who is an outsider, seeks to blend in with the community he seeks to photograph to avoid disturbing the unfolding of the activities to which the community has granted him access. The aim is the creation of a unique relationship between the people participating and the photographer—and, in the very end, the production of images that may have great relevance to the life, thought, and identity of the people portrayed. In the course of my decade-long work with the monks of Luang Prabang, I learned that, in the context of the Lao and Buddhist cultures, this means, very interestingly, that to be "right," an image must also be "beautiful," and vice-versa. In fact, these two terms, applied by the Lao to their ceremonies and rituals, also form their judgment of the results of our community work: whatever is not right and beautiful cannot bring merit, and therefore is of no use in the development of *bun* (a fundamental concept of popular belief) and insight-wisdom, which the learned Buddhists seek in order to understand the "three characteristics of existence": suffering, impermanence, and non-self.

Right from the beginning, the Sangha had a very clear motive for the invitation they had extended to me: the goal was not only to document meticulously the particularity of Luang Prabang's meditation tradition, but also to empower all participants and their spiritual practice through the photographic process. What a challenge, I said to myself. I was sincerely conscious of my position as an un-knowing outsider, and aware of the limitations imposed by the technical means at my disposal. My only comfort was the good experience of my previous work on sacred ceremonies, where I managed to learn and understand complex situations in the course of the work process, mostly thanks to the continuous support and advice given by the senior monks who had decided to sustain my work. I had hoped that such support would be given once more, and I trusted my previous experience. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the highly intimate, profoundly interior and spiritual activity of meditation would be very difficult to translate into images that would not only show exterior features, the mere surface of the riddle, and just be a painfully banal reflection of the truth.

How could a practice directed to inner achievement, serenity, and insight be translated into an image?

Vipassana is probably one of the most intimate meditation practices existing. The meditator is alone with himself and deeply concentrated on an inner process that is not supposed to be carried to an outside world at all. The practice may put young people who have had no meditation experience in a difficult situation, where advice and guidance are needed, as well as a realm of confidence and tranquility undisturbed by any presence that is not fully part of the meditation experience itself. Wouldn't my presence be a serious disturbance for the entire project, based on a pure and trusting interaction between the teachers, the meditators, and the helping laypeople? Hadn't the monks of Luang Prabang seen enough photographers and cameras?

But the organizing abbots, while seeing these risks and, probably, other possible dangers and complications I wasn't even aware of, insisted on their invitation: the importance and uniqueness of the endeavor, its role in the revival of Lao Buddhism, and its complete novelty were strong reasons for having me with them. The retreats should be communicated to the outside world; it was good that such communication should be done through images coming out of a process of close cooperation between them and myself, images that are—in our Western term—community work done with a person they knew and trusted, and who would concentrate on this task of creating images throughout the retreat.

I decided to work with my analog Hasselblad middle-format camera, and in black and white, setting the work on meditation in line with my previous work on the ceremonies of Luang Prabang, which was made in the same way. The middle-format camera produces square images that are voluntarily static and calm; the square format also has a clear reference to Buddhist cosmology, art, and architecture (a stupa must be set on a square base, for example). Most of the participants were already used to my camera (certainly a curious object, especially when set on a tripod, in the middle of a forest), which permits glances of those who are to be photographed through the lens during the rather extended time of camera setup. This stimulates the process of discussion I seek. It is a camera and a procedure that makes

"snapshots" utterly impossible: with such a camera you cannot catch anybody by surprise. The choice of black and white is in line with my concept of photography, which seeks a certain degree of abstraction. I still find that one looks more attentively to black-and-white photographs than to color ones; and I like the wonderful artisanal process of making silver-gelatin prints, a medium that is becoming so incredibly rare that it will soon die out.

I took care not to intervene in the settings: no use of artificial light; no change of positions of those photographed, except for group portraits that had been decided upon; use of a 400-ASA-film during the entire day, which made night or very early morning photographs impossible. I find such limitations of means helpful in my process of creation; these decisions probably were the most solitary ones I took in the process.

Climate conditions influenced the process. In analog photography, the film and the camera both are affected by humidity, light, and temperature, as well as by bugs, sand, dust, etc. At the time of the retreats, the Lao cool season meant strong daily temperature and humidity variations (early morning is humid and quite cold, with rain-like dew in the forest, mid-day is sunny and hot, the humidity drops sharply in the afternoon, and fog sets in again before sunset, with the evening coolness). All this influences film and its chemical composition, particularly the gelatin of the negatives, inside the camera box as well as during storage and transport after exposure. In some of my photographs, experts may discover small traces of these influences of the forest climate that I chose not to delete from the negatives: I like them as a token of authenticity.

I had also taken a small digital camera with me to facilitate the discussion process, and to be able to have quick control of situations I had seen. I kept it in a pocket in my trousers and, day after day, used it more frequently, and with more pleasure. In the end, when looking at all this digital material, which is in color, I found that I could use part of it for a more "serious" purpose. One was the production of a schoolbook that would, in a step-by-step-manner, depict the bodily exercises used in meditation. The other was the production of—very few—digital images that would introduce elements of color and movement into my work done in black and white.

My presence at the retreat, my movements, camera positions, and times of greater or lesser activity were carefully considered with the monks even before I started to work. The organization and the succession of the different stages of teaching were at the outset quite unknown to me. They were complex and varied from teacher to teacher, as they also vary in the different meditation traditions. I listened to explanations and observed from a distance. I did not see a general rule. It took days for me to understand the process; to my good fortune, the first retreat was preceded by the ceremony of parivassakam, a week-long ritual of concentration and purification in the forest monastery, reserved only to the monks who would have a teaching or leading position in the retreats. This permitted me to consider possible positions of the camera, to become accustomed to the availability of light (much happened at dawn or dusk, or at night, when taking pictures was difficult with the specific process I had chosen for my work) and to start interacting with those monks who wanted to enter more deeply into the process of taking pictures. This process worked in a remarkable way. Very soon, almost every single photograph was calmly discussed. Monks would suggest that I take part in certain teaching sessions, novices would ask me to do portraits, and I would see situations I thought should be photographed, suggested that we document them, and was presented with an occasion to do so a day or two later—in most cases with a suggestion as to where the camera should stand, and from which distance I should work. We joined in an effort to avoid errors right from the beginning but sometimes failed. We then waited for another occasion and redid the photograph. Between the two retreats, I came back to Luang Prabang with all contact sheets and showed them to several senior monks and to most of the people whose portraits I had taken. It soon became clear when I had been going in the good direction, and where changes had to be made. I need not underline that this atmosphere of exchange, collective reflection, and discussion has been of the greatest help. The large body of work now existing would not have come to life without the generosity and the faith brought to me by the elder monks, but also by the numerous young participants who, more and more, became accustomed to my presence and to the process of exchange which they fully understood. This has been one of the most transporting, joyful experiences in my career as an artist, and it has helped me to further develop and refine my method of working. What is more, it has been an intense and bright life experience, and very likely, a kind of meditation in itself. I did not seek to stay outside of what I witnessed, in some sort of objectiveness that would have been fully inappropriate, and pretentious. I followed the laypeople's eight precepts; I dressed in white; I spent as much time in the forest as possible.

Very soon, the working process chased away my initial hesitations and questions. It became clear that I could work, that I could become part of this extraordinary experience. As the meditation retreat unfolded, with steadiness and a rigorous, almost severe determination, my work managed to keep up with it. I understood that I was doing meaningful and novel work, I felt how my documentary activity grew, not only in the number of photographs that I could take, but also in their exceptionality and vigor. I moved

from surprise to surprise, and realized that my photographs managed to render this surprise. In all the regularity of the day, there was an incredible amount of change and development. As the days passed, I could see the strong influence that being in the forest, living in a secluded community, and experiencing meditation practice had on the participants. Serenity, calm, and inner absorption grew and pervaded the forest, making it a haven that, day after day, became more difficult for me to leave. To my astonishment, the immense amount of organization needed to maintain several hundred people (the provision of food and water, the transport of necessities, the organization of alms rounds, the falling sick of several dozens of novices during the second retreat) did not in the least interfere with this serenity and concentration. With my work and conduct, I tried to live up to this quality of application.

Among my images, I find one to be particularly striking. It is the image "Moving down", which shows a novice moving from the standing position into the sitting one in the course of his meditation exercise. The photograph freezes the movement, which we imagine as slow and floating, in a position where the novice's body is half-way down. This movement, we imagine, must produce great tension, yet the expression of the novice's face, as well as his body, is calm and gentle, in obvious contrast to the physical condition the body is in—muscles tight, knees almost painfully bent, upper body upright. Deep forest scenery surrounds the novice, who seems alone with himself, and nature.

The image manages to go beyond the mere narrative of a body's position in a defined space. First of all, it brings to our attention the quality of a precise, very brief instant which might be easily overlooked by an occasional observer witnessing the entire exercise: since the photograph freezes this moment, and presents it to our perception, we understand more intensely the link between body and mind, movement and concentration, which is an essential feature of Vipassana. Yet we know that this is a highly transitory position of the body: the meditator must descend, because he cannot hold this position, which is physically impossible to maintain. The photograph shows a moment, indicating (with a certain urgency, which comes from our own body experience) that there has been a "before" and that there will be an "after." We even have a rather precise feeling of time. We know that it is a question of seconds: the novice cannot stay in this position for long. While showing a fixed position, the photograph tells us also about a movement. In fact we cannot see it, but our mind readily anticipates it. We think we almost see how this movement will continue. For a tiny moment, we look in the future. We foresee what is going to happen (to make it even more complicated: we foresee what is going to happen at a moment clearly positioned in a rather distant past: this is a photograph taken in December 2005). We understand: our first perception (stillness) has been wrong, or at least inadequate—a too-hurried judgment on reality. Once we go deeper than the surface of things, we understand the wider dimension inherent in this image (movement). We come close to a central Buddhist perception and thought: the concept of impermanence. Then let us look at the forest: in the photograph, the forest seems solemnly, quietly at a perfect standstill; yet we know that there are myriad life processes going on, and that it is not the same at this very moment as it was in the preceding moment, and that it will never be the same as at the moment when the photograph was taken. It is, like the body of the novice, subject to constant change, the result of life processes that cannot be stopped (and, as we know, suffering, death). The Buddha asked his disciples: how can something that is constantly changing (like the body of the novice, like every other human body), something that is never the same, be called "I" or "Myself"? How can we overlook this simple evidence of the constant flow of life, of the continuity of change in even the smallest particles of our body, and continue to pretend to be inimitable, static, an individual, fixed once and forever in its particularity and uniqueness? How can we uphold this illusion? And the disciples said to the Buddha: "Indeed we cannot."

When I understood that some of the images that have come out of our common effort of work may lead to such and similar questions, I understood that we had proven that it was possible to photograph meditation, to go beyond the surface, to capture a portion of the meaning and the importance of the noble, good, and gracious exercise of the monks and novices of Luang Prabang.

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Hans Georg Berger photographer and writer
www.hansgeorgberger.de