

Interview with Edward Levinson, a Photographer/Essayist living in Japan

# The Land Whisperer: An Interview with Edward Levinson

By Naoyuki Haraoka

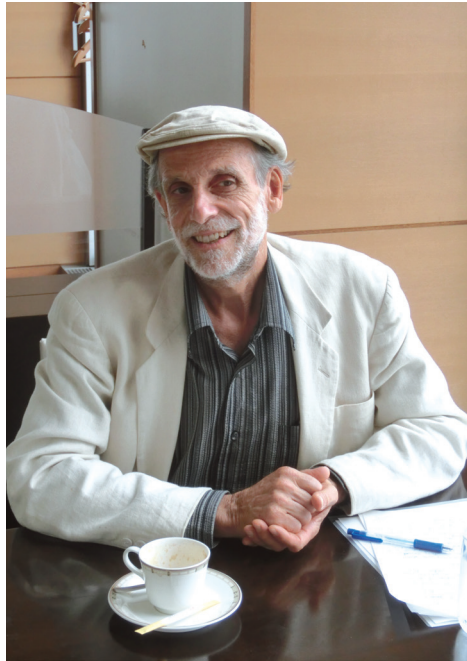
*“I will always be a traveler,  
on my way to somewhere.”*

Photographer, author, gardener, meditator, and surfer Edward Levinson listens closely to the whispers of nature and reflects them in his inspiring poetry, unique photographs, dedicated gardening, and exuberant personality. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* was fortunate to have the opportunity recently to visit the beautiful hilltop home of Levinson and his wife Tsuruta Shizuka, herself a renowned author on a wide range of subjects. Levinson’s latest book, *Whisper of the Land: Visions of Japan*, a heart-stirring collection of essays, reflections, photographs and haiku published by Fine Line Press, was launched in Tokyo on May 17. (This New Zealand-based publishing house was founded by Graham Bathgate and specializes in high-quality lyrical books on Japan.)

Levinson and Tsuruta have collaborated on many books in Japanese such as: *Futari de Tateta Ie (Living the Organic Life...Continued)* (Bunshun Bunko, 2006), the story of the construction of their present home; *Mother Earth Kitchen*, a classic vegetarian eco-lifestyle cookbook (Shibata Shoten, 1990); and *Na no Hana to Tomo ni (Living with Wild Flowers)* (Ie No Hikari Kyokai, 1994), a gorgeous collection of photographs of wild flowers. Levinson’s other solo essay books — in Japanese — include *Boku no Uekata: Jinsei o Tagayasu (My Way of Planting: Cultivating a Life in Japan)* (Iwanami Shoten 2011) and *Edo-san’s Pinhoru Shashin Kyoushitsu (Edo’s Lesson in Pinhole Photography — Photography for Slow Life)* (Iwanami Shoten, 2007). He also published an award-winning photo book *Timescapes Japan — A Pinhole Journey* (Nippon Camera, 2006). The couple were recently featured, promoting vegetarian cuisine (both are long-term, committed vegetarians), on the cover of *li ne*, a magazine published by Tokyo’s Crayon House. Below are some highlights of our interview with Levinson.

**JS: Could you explain the title of your book *Whisper of the Land*, and why you chose it?**

**Levinson:** We had a really big problem in finding a title that captured the essence of the book. At first I had *Adventures in Paradise: A*



*Edward Levinson, a Photographer/Essayist living in Japan*

*Spiritual Memoir from a Garden in Japan* as a working title, but it was too long and not really appropriate. We went through 100 titles or more, and then Kitaro [the award-winning Japanese composer and musician], who wrote the introduction for the book, used this phrase in his poem: “Ed-san began to really hear the ‘whisper of the land of Japan’.” The editor and I both picked that up. It’s a whisper, because you have to listen carefully. I added “visions” because I’m a photographer, to give some sense of that, and I wanted to have “Japan” in there somewhere since it’s about living and growing here. The title hints at a connection with the sacred and spiritual, and a nuance of meditation.

**JS: Throughout the book you look at harmony, beauty, and love, which all lead to happiness, and you find this in Japan.**

**Levinson:** It’s the key. In Japan I found many loves: the love of culture, the physical land, my wife, the land in general. There is a lot of beauty in Japan, even if sometimes you have to hunt for it among the ugliness, which there is unfortunately also a lot of.

**JS: Is this unique to Japan, or unique to you?**

**Levinson:** It’s unique to me. I’ll look for these three qualities wherever I go. I was already practicing this before I came to Japan, and when I came it fit very easily. I happened to read Fukuoka-san’s book [*The One Straw Revolution* (1975), the “Natural Farming” classic by Fukuoka Masanobu] but at the time I knew nothing about either him or Japan. A friend happened to be coming to Japan and asked me to join her, so I did.

Meditation is another key word. My meditation is serious in a sense, but very relaxed. It’s a nature meditation; I often just sit and enjoy the sun or wind. There is a religious aspect to it; perhaps you could call it animism, but it goes much deeper than that. Yes, I think meditation does lead to happiness, but it can lead to sadness too, as you feel the pain of others and the problems of the world.

**JS: There are many who oppose anything artificial:**

**for example, some environmentalists strongly oppose all economic and material growth. But you are very generous. You do emphasize nature, but you don't necessarily deny material desires. I think this is a very important attitude for us.**

**Levinson:** We need material things, food, money, a house, and so on. Some people need to eat meat or fish, or drink sake. Sometimes people are surprised to see me drink, since I'm a vegetarian — but wine is made of grapes! I'm not a Buddhist but the way I live is similar to what they call the Middle Way.

**JS: What do you think are the distinguishing charms of the nature of Japan?**

**Levinson:** Art, tradition, and other things coexist. There's a good balance in Japan — trees, water, the sea, also the way people blend in — the *satoyama* concept [defined in Levinson's book as "pastoral foothill farming landscapes"]. Japanese try to achieve harmony between nature and the artificial — sometimes the results are humorous as mentioned in the book.

There are huge varieties of plants in Japan. It's a very rich environment, and foreigners, or Japanese who have been living overseas and come back here, are often surprised at how many interesting weeds and grasses grow in Japan.

**JS: Do you also find any charm or beauty in a big city like Tokyo?**

**Levinson:** Yes, there are some elements of nature even in an artificial environment. They are easy to find. I'm really fond of Tokyo and Osaka as well as Kyoto, Kobe, Nagoya, and Fukuoka — they each have a different mood. I enjoy coming in to the big city, seeing exhibitions, shooting lots of photos, and meeting interesting people. It's all about balance.

I find there is almost always some element of nature in my photos — the clouds, a bird on a windowsill, the play of light on buildings — showing how humans and nature coexist in the city. When in a city, I often find myself gravitating towards a park.

I like chasing the little cracks of light between buildings, the sunset reflecting on a high-rise, or the moon rising over Tokyo Station, but I'm always amazed that so many people don't see it, so few people look.

The sun and shadows are also attractive in the city, and the moonlight, and people as well. I've done several photo series featuring cityscapes. I recently had a photo exhibition titled "Beauty and Symbolism in the City" and most of the images were taken in Tokyo. It had shapes and light bouncing round, some humor, some sarcasm. I take pictures of what I see, and sometimes it ends up being quite documentary, without that intention, such as showing the homeless, or people staring at their cell phones — how people interact with nature in the city.

**JS: What is the most interesting or attractive part of Japanese landscapes or people?**

**Levinson:** The rituals and traditions involving the cycles of nature, changing of seasons, etc. Even traditional *sarariman* (Japanese white collar worker) always remember *ohigan* (spring and autumn equinoxes) and *obon* (summer festival to honor dead ancestors), and mark the four seasons. Sometimes Japanese go a little overboard; for example, all the TV commercials show *sakura* (cherry blossoms) or *momiji* (maple leaves) at the same time, and every season they have to bring out some new product. It gets to be a bit too much, sometimes it's even fake. I laugh when everyone puts on a short-sleeved shirt on June 1 and it's a cold wet day at the start of the rainy season. And now it's summer so everyone's in a straw hat and *zori* (Japanese-type sandals). I mean, Japanese people tend to follow the rules and seasonal stereotypes without really thinking about it. It's nice that the spring and fall equinoxes are almost national holidays here, whereas in many other countries they'd hardly be noticed at all.

**JS: Seasonal changes are a very important part of haiku. Do you find haiku the best art to describe the beauty of Japan?**

**Levinson:** Well I can't say if it's the best, but it's one good way. And very Japanese, because it's so minimalist, making it more difficult. It certainly has continued popularity with all age groups. I usually write my haiku when I have an "aha" inspiration. I like the idea of the *kigo* (seasonal word), but not the restriction that says that I *have* to use one. For example, the other day [in August] Shizuka and I were sitting on the deck after dinner looking at the beautiful half-moon, and we decided to try writing some haiku. Just playing. But it turns out that the word for half-moon, *hangetsu*, is the *kigo* for fall, not summer. So you're not supposed to use it now, in summer. But to me that doesn't make sense.

**JS: Haiku is an art that can have a healing impact on both the writer and the reader. And your photos are also healing. Are your haiku and your photos closely related to each other?**

**Levinson:** In their essence, where they come from is similar. Sometimes I'll write a haiku and wait till I get a photo to go with it before I'll put it up on Facebook, for example. The idea of combining the two is quite popular now in Japan. There've been several television programs dedicated to this. It's very interesting. Other times I'll have a photo first and then have to come up with a haiku or poetic caption to go with it.

I used to teach nature meditations, using verbal messages with photographs. The students would ask which comes first, the photo image or the meditation? Well, it works in both ways. I take pictures all the time — it's what I feel and see, anything that gets me excited. I think the popularity of combining photos and haiku is good — it shows a variety of visions. In my book I use a haiku at the beginning of each chapter to set the mood, in a way to summarize what's in the essay.

**JS: Japan is now evolving, in various different directions. How do you see the future evolution of**

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Photo 1: ©Edward Levinson



The old view of Tokyo, Grand Prince Hotel Akasaka, 1997

### the beauty of Japan?

**Levinson:** I hope that the younger generation of Japanese may wake up. The last two generations lost their way a bit, with helter-skelter building, making all these “improvements” in nature. Maybe a dam here and there is needed to provide electricity, or you’ve got to protect the coastline, or upgrade buildings in this earthquake-prone country, OK. But in America there are very strict zoning laws. Zoning laws can be a pain in the neck but the seeming lack of such in Japan is something foreigners find hard to understand. Where I live Kamogawa, a resort town, there is an eyesore junkyard right there on the main road with just a rope around it.

With scenes of Tokyo in my photo book, a lot of those places don’t exist any more and some of them were modern landmark buildings like the Grand Prince Hotel Akasaka. Any city has to grow, of course, but I find it a bit strange (*Photo 1*). Even in Ginza they’re tearing things down. In my recent short movie, *Tokyo Story*, there is a scene showing Matsuzakaya department store and now it’s not there any more, and that was only two years ago! Incidentally, that movie was a homage to Ozu Yasujiro’s 1953 film with the same title. I shot it in 2013-14, but it looks as if it was made in the 1950s. That shows the influence of Japanese films on the way I see things. If there is such a thing as a previous life, it would be nice if I had come to Japan maybe 30 years earlier, because I really like the mood of the mid-Showa period (around 1945-1965).

I have to say I’m against the Tokyo Olympics. I don’t think it is such a good idea, though of course there will be some infrastructure improvements. Nowadays a lot of people are demonstrating every day, no nukes or anti-war, and most of them seem to be either over 60 or under 30. I think this is good, if only the government will listen to them.

**JS:** Pinhole photography, one of your specialties, seems to be ideal for describing the uniqueness of

### Japanese culture. Why is this so?

**Levinson:** Yes, I think it is. Sometimes I take a pinhole landscape photograph, and it’s shot in Japan or America or Vietnam, but you can’t tell the difference. For example, once I had a photo of rural Pennsylvania in an exhibition, and a Japanese man said, “Oh, this is so *natsukashii* (nostalgic), it reminds me of my rural town in Yamanashi.” You get a kind of minimalist effect, it’s soft and vague. For better or worse, Japanese culture and people can be vague, so you often have to guess the intended meaning, as it’s not so clear. So maybe this type of photography matches Japanese culture. The pinhole camera is just an empty dark box, but whatever its “sees” when you open the shutter comes in and is recorded as an image. You could say this is a metaphor for *zazen* (Zen meditation). If you just sit in the darkness, and open your heart or your third eye or whatever you want to call it, some image comes up.

**JS:** In my opinion, Japan is like Alice in Wonderland. Very beautiful, but everything is tiny, people are different, it’s very peaceful and there is harmony between people and nature. Pinhole photography is magical technology so it is very good for describing Alice in Wonderland. Do you agree?

**Levinson:** Kind of. It is definitely a different world that comes up. A lot of people when they first come here do have a sense of wonder, but after they’ve been here for a long time, many regret or lament the “Disney-fication” of Japan. A lot of foreigners have a really negative image of Japan. I think Japanese have to be aware of this. Meanwhile, some other foreigners feel they have a mission to help Japanese remember their real culture.

**JS:** Your haiku at the end of the book — “spider dances for breakfast, insects call to prayer, cicadas vibrate mind” — is very beautiful. To me it is the symbol of the authentic happiness of a human being existing in harmony between people and nature. Is that what you mean in creating such haiku? You have been searching for beauty and peace for a long time, and you found it in Japan. This haiku seems the symbol of serenity and a peaceful life.

**Levinson:** Thank you, that’s interesting. Your interpretation of it is right. The syllables don’t really match, in Japanese or English, so maybe it’s not a proper haiku. But I really like it, and it’s already published in the book, so I won’t change it! It is one of my favorite ones as well, even though it has a bit of a religious aspect, with the mention of the call to prayer. For me, harmonizing with nature — which I respect as being something sacred, obviously — has always been very important. It is the key to all of what I do. If I go for too long without some contact with nature, I start to not feel right. I feel I lose something, even if my life is going well with lots of so-called pleasures. If I am in a city for a while, I have to look up at the sky, or the grass, or a beautiful person, because people are part of nature too. I’m not anti-people; whatever kind of person they are, I still look at



Photo 2: ©Edward Levinson



*A tree creates its own power spot, honored with a small shrine on an island in Osawa Pond in Kyoto.*

them with the same respect for humanity.

**JS: That sounds as if it is coming from Buddhism. Are you affected by Buddhism?**

**Levinson:** Yes and no. My religious background is quite complicated. I was brought up in the American Jewish tradition, though not very strict. My first life partner was a Christian. I became a member of their church and they said I had to get baptized, and I said OK, I can go along with it. But at the same time I was studying the oneness behind all the separate traditions. Even before I came to Japan, I was participating in a meditation circle where we ceremoniously honored all the different religions. So it was very easy for me to come here. I like the philosophy of Buddhism: the Middle Way, be here now, concentrate. But I don't want to go and study Buddhism formally. I also really like Japanese Shintoism or animism or whatever we want to call it. I can go to a big or small shrine, and get high and feel good without doing anything; there's something magical about it. In Europe I can sit in an old church for a few minutes and feel the same thing (*Photo 2*).

**JS: You have traveled a lot all over the world. Do you plan to travel more in the future?**

**Levinson:** Yes, of course, it is always good to get out and see a different culture — but also always good to come back and appreciate some of Japan's special manners, etc. It is interesting that when I travel, exhibit my works, give talks, or send my books around the world, or people see my website, I am a kind of ambassador for Japan. For example, two years ago I gave a lecture on pinhole photography at the photo museum Musée Nicéphore Niépce in France, and most of the photos were taken in Japan. Of course it is my take on, and understanding of, Japanese culture that I am telling them. In a recent lecture at Lakeland College in Tokyo, I gave a slide show and talked a

lot about how I see Japanese culture, giving concrete examples of *giri* [moral obligation] and *ninjo* [human feelings] and how I think that works. The audience, which was mostly young people, students, found it very interesting. Maybe Japanese people are a little too heavy on the *giri* and not strong enough on the *ninjo*. If I have a mission in Japan, maybe it is to get Japanese people to appreciate their own *ninjo*, which I describe in my book as “heartfelt feelings and actions” (*Photo 3*).

**JS: I feel the serenity and love for every creature and every land in your photos, which makes me so happy. Are happiness and compassion what you are pursuing in your art?**

**Levinson:** In my photos I want to share what I feel, what I see, what excites my being. Happiness and compassion are of course two important qualities, but there are many other qualities as well. I want to communicate truth and light and joy. Of course there are also other things such as sadness, but they are all different branches of the same tree, the tree of life, if we only allow the tree to grow. This is a new image that just came to me this morning. So maybe that's what my mission is, that's why I take so many pictures of trees. There are so many branches to the tree of life.

I use the phrase “the essence of being” to describe my work. That covers everything, including the title of the book. Mostly I want to show the positive — there is already so much negative stuff in the world that I prefer to concentrate on the positive and radiate that; it's very simple. For example, this is a chant or mantra that I enjoy, I think it's originally a Buddhist prayer: “May all beings be happy, may all beings be well. Peace, peace, peace.” If you didn't do anything else in your life other than repeat that a few times a day, you'd probably be doing a lot more than Prime Minister Shinzo Abe or many other world leaders.

**JS: In relation to the economy, capitalism is hitting a bottleneck. You provide a solution to capitalism — you can enjoy material things but at the same time focus on spiritual things, in a balance between the material and the spiritual. That way of life will lead to**

Photo 3: ©Edward Levinson



*A group of children take time-out from playing to strike a standard Japanese pose at a small shrine on the outskirts of Tokyo, circa 1985.*

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### the authentic happiness of human beings.

**Levinson:** You have to have the balance. There are some capitalists who are doing wonderful things for the planet, and of course you have the opposite, some who are doing terrible things. There are poor people who are taking money from the government, drinking, not doing anything for the planet. And there are poor people who are doing wonderful, wonderful things for the planet, farming, keeping the earth looking good. For the Japanese economy, there are a lot of treasures and so much beauty here. Japan should try to keep it uncluttered. Maybe Japan is not quite qualified for eco-tourism but there are a lot of interesting things to do out in the countryside such as rappelling down a waterfall or kayaking along beautiful rivers. A lot of these activities are run by foreigners. If you go to the ones run by Japanese, you often get disappointed, as they can be a bit touristy with the guide speaking too much, or you can only stop for five minutes to take a photo, or there are hordes of screaming kids on the boat.

Another example, you might look at a map and see all these lakes and think that would be a good place to get views of Mt. Fuji, but when you go there there's all this terrible stuff, swan boats, souvenir shops, and usually it does not look very good. So then you go to a good spot and there's 150 people standing there taking the same photo.

I love walking around the old part of Kyoto, but I won't be so keen to go there if that changes.

**JS: It is necessary for us to stop and see the many beautiful things and landscapes around us. This is a key to happiness.**

**Levinson:** Yes, people need to slow down. Even as a photographer I find some spot I like and stay there. If I go to Kyoto, I can see maybe two temples a day, especially if it is pinhole photography, as I take my time and stay there, and it's kind of slow work. I might take five pinhole photos, and one is good. Sometimes tour buses come and it's noisy, but then it is quiet and I enjoy a beautiful scene. It's the same at beautiful famous spots in Europe; it's always very crowded but if you wait a while you might get a very special moment and you're the only one who sees it.

**JS: You said you are already an ambassador for Japan. Could you tell me about your future photography, haiku, or other projects?**

**Levinson:** That's difficult, because I don't really know what the future will bring. There was a time when I wanted to be a photojournalist and I did do some work on Chernobyl and Japan's *gomi mondai* (rubbish problem), and so on. But I decided that's not what I really want to do. I need to go back to the love, harmony and beauty image, that's what I'm really good at. As for haiku, if by chance some humor, sarcasm or political comment on Japan comes out, that's fine. And I'd like to do something similar to the *Tokyo Story* movie, in Kyoto if I can find sponsors.

My garden is also an ongoing thing; it's almost out of control now, and we wonder, what did we start, it's getting so big. Can I take care of it or not in 10 years? If something happened to me, it would get

completely overgrown and the whole place would disappear in a year. But maybe that's OK. It's something I have to remind myself about every day. Because I am living an idyllic life, I could just stay there and never go out, never go to Tokyo, never write a book. But my wife and I do lectures, and talk about our life, the garden, write books, setting an example and actually doing it ourselves. Sometimes you see famous celebrities doing *inaka gurashi* (living a country lifestyle) and growing vegetables in the garden, but they don't necessarily do it all themselves, they might get locals or volunteers from the city to help. That's good too, as you are teaching people how to do it and giving local people or those who don't live in the country something positive to do.

But for me, if I didn't do the hands-on work myself, I wouldn't be happy. It gives me balance. The fact is, though, that even with all that work and effort going into the garden, sometimes nobody sees it; just me, my wife, our dog, and the *inoshishi* (wild boars). So we try to share this bounty through photos and writings.

Much of the inspiration for *Whisper of the Land* came from the garden. Every one of the essays in the book begins with some incident that occurs there. My physical garden is the center of my universe. The spiritual garden in the heart, however, is a revolving door connecting the inner and outer lives (*Photo 4*).

Photo 4: ©Edward Levinson



Stone steps pass through the Rose Sharon arch, connecting the terraced landscapes at Solo Hill Garden, Levinson's present home.

*Whisper of the Land* website — <http://www.whisperoftheland.com>

Fine Line Press website — <http://www.finelinepress.co.nz>

Edward Levinson's "Edo Photos Pinhole Photography" website — <http://www.edophoto.com>

JS

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