

MOVING FROM EMPTINESS: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude

Running time: 69-minutes. With Alok Hsu Kwang-Han and Raylene Abbott
Directed and Produced by: Shaeri Richards and Jerry Hartleben

Brief Synopsis

With brush, ink, rice paper and the play of light and dark, Zen master painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han explores the inner world of energy and creativity for himself and his students. On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his own history. Playful, profound, meditative, and deeply healing, this 69-minute documentary is more than just a film, it's a transformational experience.

Log Line

With brush, ink, rice paper and the play of light and dark, Zen painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han explores the inner world of energy and creativity for himself and his students. On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his own history .

50 words

With brush, ink, and rice paper, Zen painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han uses the play of light and dark to explore energy, creativity, and the art of life. On the verge of his 75th birthday, with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his personal history.

New short Synopsis

Playful. Profound. Meditative. Deeply healing. Moving from Emptiness: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude is more than just a film, it's a transformational experience. The 69-minute documentary film features the work and teachings of Zen calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han. Through his personal history, art, workshops and his relationship with fellow artist Raylene Abbott we discover the creativity and magic that become possible when we are simply "present, available, playful and not knowing."

Short Synopsis

Where does creativity come from? Zen calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han proposes that it arises from emptiness, from that silent space that houses the intelligence prior to thought. Armed with rice paper, ink, brush, and a collection of Zen teachings and koans, Alok opens the door to a world of magical brush strokes and enchanted students. On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his own personal history. Through his koans, workshops, art, and his relationship, we share a journey of transformation that becomes possible when we are simply "present, available, playful, and not knowing." Through Alok we discover that "in a clear heart, no mountain hides the moon.

Short Synopsis v.2

Where does creativity come from? Chinese born Zen master calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han proposes that it arises from "Emptiness," that silent space that houses intelligence prior to thought. Armed with rice paper, ink, brush, and a collection of Zen teachings and koans, Alok opens the door to a world of magical brush strokes and enchanted students. Through his art and workshops, he explores the Zen concepts of the self (no self), meditation, suffering and authenticity. On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his own personal history.

Medium length synopsis

Playful. Profound. Meditative. Deeply healing. Moving from Emptiness: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude is more than just a film, it's a transformational experience. The film begins with an exploration of creativity. Where does it come from? Zen calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-han proposes that it arises from emptiness, from that silent space that houses the intelligence prior to thought. Armed with rice paper, ink, brush, and a collection of Zen teachings and koans, he unlocks a magical door for his students. According to Alok, he teaches painting "by not teaching painting." Instead he shows students how to get out of their own way so that "creativity happens by itself."

Alok is truly a Zen dude and through him we discover the world of Zen. Like a performance artist, he deeply enters this space of silence preparing to paint in front of audiences and groups. Moments later, the crowd delights as his artwork appears before their eyes with a few elegant strokes of the brush.

Alok lives his life very much like he teaches his workshops: remaining open to both beauty and pain, bringing presence and acceptance to whatever arises in front of him and vowing to set endless heartaches to rest. He does it all while invoking a spunky sense of humor that keeps us smiling.

On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life, Alok employs his teachings to confront his own personal history. Through his workshops and his art we share a journey of transformation that becomes possible when we are simply "present, available, playful, and not knowing."

Long Synopsis

“Moving from Emptiness: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude” is a feature documentary exploring the art, philosophy and personal history of Zen calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-Han. His work leads us to the source of creativity, which according to Alok, begins with emptiness, that silent space that houses the intelligence prior to thought. Armed with rice paper, ink, brush, and a collection of Zen teachings and koans, he unlocks a magical door for his students. According to Alok, he teaches painting “by not teaching painting.” Instead he shows students how to get out of their way, so that “creativity happens on its own.”

Alok is truly a Zen dude and through him we discover the world of Zen. Like a performance artist, he often paints in real time as in front of audiences and groups. His pre-painting talks are full of humor and wisdom. Then he prepares to paint by entering a place of deep silence, where he waits for the energy to move his brush. Moments later, the crowd delights as his artwork appears before their eyes with a few elegant strokes.

Filmed in a narrative style, the movie reveals Alok’s teachings as he gives talks and workshops across the country. In them, we are exposed to a deeper understanding of Zen and Zen art. His students are often given Zen teachings called Koans to ponder and to paint. These Koans, which are short paradoxical sayings or poems are vehicles used by Alok to guide painters into a direct perception of the energy of life, which is also the energy of Zen. Although the experience of being “fully present” is not easily put into words, Alok’s friends and colleagues, Roko Shinge Roshi of the Zen Center of Syracuse, N.Y. and John Tarrant Roshi of the Pacific Zen Institute of Santa Rosa, CA, enrich the film with enlightening talks of the Zen experience.

The film also delves into Alok’s personal history, as we learn of his difficult childhood in China during the Japanese invasion of World War II and the suffering of the Chinese people. His family’s travails in immigrating to America from war torn China during the Communist civil war have had a lasting effect on Alok’s life. He allows himself to move deeply into the pain of the past in order to bring light into the darkness of the suffering, both for himself and for those he encounters in his world and his work.

Alok lives his life very much like he teaches his workshops: remaining open to both beauty and pain, bringing presence and acceptance to whatever arises in front of him and vowing to set endless heartaches to rest. He does it all while invoking a spunky sense of humor that keeps us smiling.

On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life (author and fellow Zen painter Raylene Abbott) Alok employs his teachings to confront his own personal history and to navigate the challenges of their new relationship.

Through his workshop, his relationship, his life, and his art we share a journey of transformation that becomes possible when we are simply "present, available, playful, and not knowing." We come to know "moving from emptiness" as a way to trust the energy of life to carry us where we need to go. Through Alok we discover that "in a clear heart, no mountain hides the moon".

Revised Long Form Synopsis

"Moving from Emptiness: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude" is a feature documentary exploring the art, philosophy and personal history of Chinese born Zen master calligraphic painter Alok Hsu Kwang-Han. His art is vividly portrayed, arising from a deep source of creativity. According to Alok, creativity begins with the Zen concept of "Emptiness," that silent space that houses the intelligence prior to thought.

Armed with rice paper, ink, brush, and a collection of Zen teachings and koans, Alok opens the door to a world of magical brush strokes and enchanted students. According to Alok, he teaches painting "by not teaching painting." Instead he shows students how to get out of their way, so that "creativity happens on its own."

Alok is truly a Zen dude and through his life and art the world of Zen is revealed. Like a performance artist, he paints in real time in front of audiences and groups. He begins by entertaining with humor and wisdom and then prepares to paint by entering a place of deep silent meditation, where he waits for the "Emptiness" to move his brush. Moments later, the crowd delights as his artwork appears before their eyes in seconds with just a few elegant strokes.

Filmed in an artistic, narrative style, the movie follows Alok, revealing his unique art and teachings as he gives workshops across the country. In them, the viewer is exposed to a deeper understanding of Zen and Zen art. The music of Deva Premal and Miten provides a thematic score for the unfolding of Alok's story. His work serves as a metaphor for a Zen approach to living and his brush strokes can be viewed as an unfolding of the path of life.

His students are given Zen word puzzles called Koans to ponder and to paint. These Koans, which are short paradoxical sayings or poems are vehicles used to guide student painters into a direct perception of their own source of creativity. Alok demonstrates to his students the Chinese Zen concept of "Wu-wei," literally meaning "not knowing" and its important role in the creative process of the Zen arts. Not knowing allows the artist to find inspiration in the moment, without a preconceived idea.

Although the experience of being "fully present" is not easily put into words, Alok's friends and fellow Zen teachers, Roko Shinge Roshi of the Zen Center of Syracuse, N.Y.

and John Tarrant Roshi of the Pacific Zen Institute of Santa Rosa, CA, enrich the film with enlightening descriptions of the Zen experience.

Alok is featured in an intense one-on-one session where he uses a therapeutic technique to explore deep personal issues of his subject. He then paints what he calls a "Zen Calligraphic Portrait," revealing the authentic self of his guest with beautiful, abstract brush strokes.

The film also delves into Alok's personal history as a child in China during the Japanese invasion of World War II. He shares his own painful experience as well as the suffering of the Chinese people during that difficult time. His family's travails in immigrating to America from war torn China during the Communist civil war have had a lasting effect on Alok's life. He allows himself to move deeply into the pain of the past in order to bring light into the darkness of the suffering, both for himself and for those he encounters in his world and his work. Alok lives his life very much like he teaches: remaining open to both beauty and pain, bringing presence, and acceptance to whatever arises in front of him and honoring the Buddhist vow to "set endless heartaches to rest." He does it all while invoking a spunky sense of humor.

On the verge of his 75th birthday and with a new love in his life (author and fellow Zen painter Raylene Abbott) Alok employs his teachings to confront his own personal history and to navigate the challenges of a new relationship late in his life.

Through his teachings, his relationship, his life, and his art, Alok shares a journey of transformation that becomes possible with the Zen idea of being "present, available, playful, and not knowing." Alok's life and art serve as a living example of the Zen concept of "Moving from Emptiness," a way to trust and to let go of all attachments and expectations. At the conclusion of the film, as he approaches his later years, Alok finds an authentic acceptance of this present, beautifully impermanent moment of life.

Directors' Statement

The film has many layers and evolved in a Zen like way. Director, Shaeri Richards had taken a workshop with Alok and raved about him so her husband, Director Jerry Hartleben thought Alok might make a good subject. They started out to make a 6-minute short Art Film that featured artistic brush strokes with mysterious Zen quotes and music. But with each day of filming, more and more was revealed. The filmmakers followed this energy and let the movie unfold.

Shaeri and Jerry began to find themes; the Zen teachings, the concept of artistic expression arising from emptiness, loss and suffering, healing, relationships, becoming open to the feminine. These themes became the structure of the film in the writing and

editing process. Quoting the husband and wife filmmakers, “Our dream was to make a beautiful movie that moves people and to share it with others.” From the response of audiences around the world, their dream has been fulfilled.

Short Bio – Shaeri Richards and Jerry Hartleben

Filmmaker and author Shaeri Richards spent 20 years as a TV and radio journalist. She wrote and directed a documentary that aired on PBS and an award winning short film. Her husband, Jerry Hartleben has filmed over 1000 international television commercials and spent more than 30 years in Hollywood as a documentary, television and feature Director of Photography.

Shaeri Richards Short Bio

Shaeri Richards spent more than 20 years as a radio and television journalist. She wrote, directed and produced a documentary that aired nationally on PBS and wrote, directed and edited an award winning short narrative film. She is also the author of an audio book for children and an award-winning self help book. In addition, Ms. Richards is a member of a professional improvisational theatre troupe and a practicing hypnotherapist.

Jerry Hartleben Short Bio

Jerry Hartleben has more than 30 years’ experience as a professional Director of Photography of documentaries, television commercials, television series and feature motion pictures in Hollywood and around the world. He began his career as an independent documentary producer, directing and filming a series of documentaries for television release. He’s a graduate of USC School of Cinematic Arts.

Jerry Hartleben Bio

Jerry has more than 30 years’ experience as a professional Director of Photography of documentaries, television commercials, television series and feature motion pictures in Hollywood and around the world. He began his career in the film industry at the age of four as an actor at MGM. During his ten-year acting career, he worked with such renowned directors as Cecil B. DeMille, Arthur Penn and Alfred Hitchcock. It was during this time that he became interested in film and photography. While acting in “The Buccaneer” with Yul Brenner (also a master photographer), Yul took an interest in Jerry and along with the camera department at Paramount studios, personally tutored him in the art of photography. This led him to pursue his career “behind the camera.”

He later graduated from the U.S.C. School of Cinema and began his career as a Producer/Director/Cinematographer of documentaries for the U.S. Navy and later, the NBC affiliate in Phoenix, Arizona. All of this work was shot and edited on film.

As his career evolved, he moved to Hollywood and served as the Director for numerous television commercials. He was also Director of Photography for more than 1000 national and international large budget commercials for such clients as Apple Computer, Ford Motor Company, Coca Cola, Budweiser, Levi's, American Express, Mercedes, General Motors and United Airlines; working with such talent as Ridley Scott, Leonardo DiCaprio and Jerry Seinfeld (American Express commercial series). In addition to his commercial work, Jerry was Director of Photography for television films, Movies of the Week, television series and feature films. Among them were the ABC series "thirtysomething" and the feature motion picture "Wilder Napalm", starring Debra Winger and Dennis Quaid.

Shaeri Richards Bio

Shaeri often says, "If my life were a painting, I would have to describe it as mixed media." Her background is varied and her education non-traditional, yet over the years she has developed many talents and skills that come together to make her the person she is today. She is a creative soul who expresses herself in many ways, as a filmmaker, author, speaker, hypnotherapist, musician, actress, improv artist and the list goes on.

Shaeri developed an ear for story telling and getting quickly getting to the heart of a story during her 20 years as a radio and television journalist. Over the years she wrote, directed and produced a PBS documentary that aired nationally; wrote, edited and narrated several award winning radio documentaries; wrote, directed and edited an award winning short film; and authored an award-winning spiritual self help book called, "Dancing with your Dragon: The Art of Loving your Unlovable Self." She continues to support people on their spiritual journeys with her work as a coach and certified hypnotherapist.

Music is another one of Shaeri's loves. She's an accomplished trap set drummer and spent 10 years playing drums for Northern Arizona's highly popular Sammy Davis band, opening for such acts as, Paul Revere and the Raiders, Chubby Checker, Sha Na Na, and Mary Wilson and the Supremes. She's also a singer/songwriter and wrote, produced and narrated an award winning musical audio book for children. Her musical skills and her strong sense of timing continue to serve her well in the editing room.

Shaeri also enjoys performing. Over the years she has acted in more than 30 plays, and several independent movies. These days she satisfies her acting urge through improvisational theatre. She's been performing regularly as an improv artist since 2004 and is currently assistant director of the popular Zenprov Comedy Troupe in Sedona, AZ. She also teaches improv on a regular basis and finds it both exhilarating and healing.

Most recently Shaeri served as the co-writer/producer/director of “Moving from Emptiness: The Life and Art of a Zen Dude,” along with her husband, Jerry Hartleben.