



## *Bhutan*

by Richard Murai



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #99

### Commentary

Life is movement. Isn't it curious that the vast majority of photography *freezes* movement. It's almost as if we photographers were trying to eliminate movement from existence — which I suppose we are to some degree. We freeze movement in time so as viewers we can more fully ingest the moment we are observing. Unfortunately, freezing movement entirely often creates a static photograph that seems to present us with a static world. Personally, I find this reaches its height of ridiculousness in sports photography or car racing. A motionless, tack sharp racing car on the track just looks like it's parked there — no sense of action, no sense of movement.

Which is precisely why this photograph from Richard Murai is so interesting. There is movement and life, but not what we might expect. The inanimate object (the prayer flag) is the one with movement and life, while the man stands still and appears inanimate. This adds up to a very symbolic Buddhist metaphor I have no doubt the monk would appreciate.

With regularity, photographers aim for the sharp photograph, one that is sharply focused, no camera movement that would introduce blur, no subject movement that would likewise introduce blur. There are lots of photographic subjects where this is appropriate. It is not, however, a virtue when such a photographic choice becomes an unvarying habit and controls our choices for every photograph we make. Sometimes blur is a better choice.

Part of the reason we included this photograph in *LensWork* and the focus of my discussion here is the odd sense of movement introduced by this blowing prayer flag. First, the prayer flag exhibits so much motion yet the man exhibits none. How interesting! Second, the prayer flag exhibits so *much* motion, yet we can see through it, almost as if it is transparent, even non-corporeal. How does that happen? And finally, notice there is a small element of text printed in a square that appears to be relatively sharp and in focus. How is it that the flag exhibits motion but that small part with text is still readable? I assume it is because the flag is tied at a point just below the text. I prefer less analysis, however, and to allow the metaphorical interpretation to sway my emotions. The text is sharp and clearly visible because it *wants* to be read. But then again, I might just be emotionally anthropomorphizing a bit.

Can you feel the wind? That is yet another reason to allow movement in our photographs. Movement caused by wind makes all the space in the photograph come alive. Space is no longer just a lack of something solid, but is living space in the form of air, atmosphere, wind, and movement. Ironically, all this makes us more aware of time which in turn makes us more aware of the present. Not a bad consequence of selecting just the right shutter speed.