

*A philosophy of life for 21st century  
stress and anxiety*

# CAIRNS

SYMBOLS OF A  
WELL-BALANCED  
LIFE

by Jennifer Mishra



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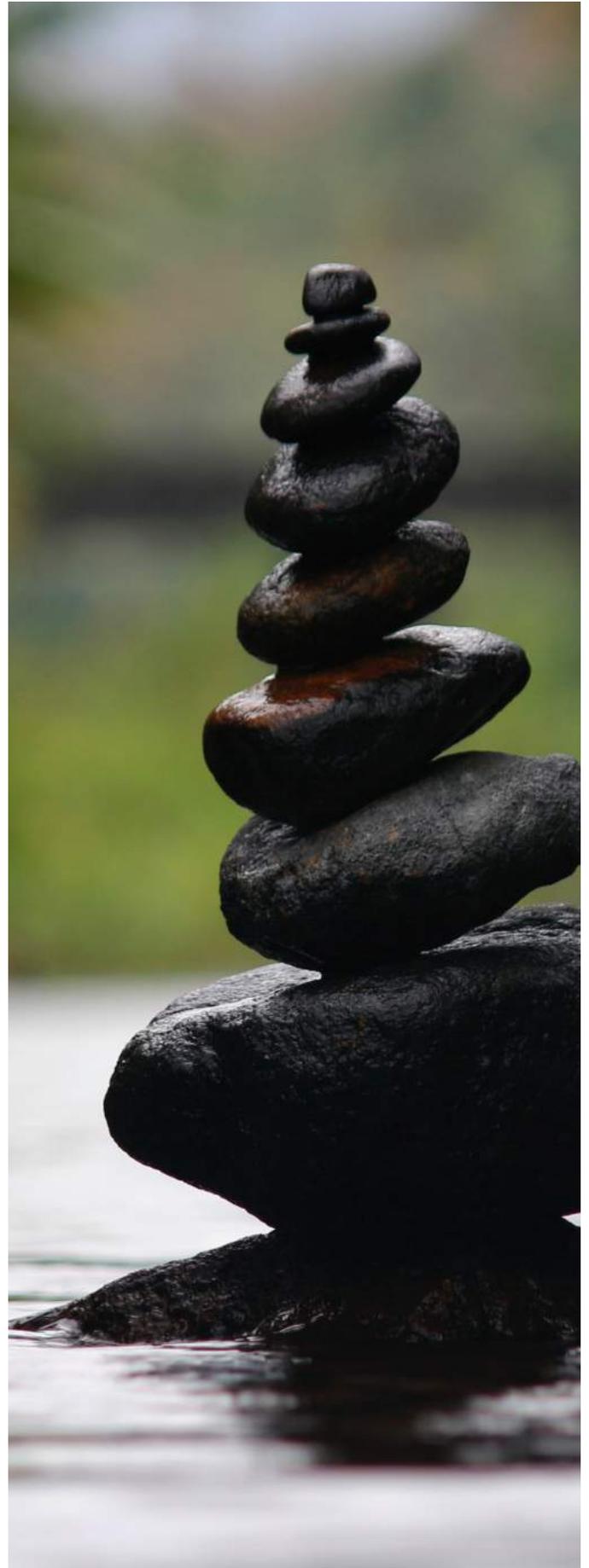
## SPECIAL THANKS

To Barbara, my constant hiking companion, who helped shape many of the ideas in this book.

And to Michael whose love makes everything possible.

**Cover photo by Chinh Le Duc**

**Photo by Nandhu Kumar**



# Cairn

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1. n. a mound of stones piled up as a landmark, memorial or to mark a boundary or path.



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# Foundation

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# 1





I first encountered cairns in 2003 on a hike near Moab, Utah. My hiking companion and I were heading towards Delicate Arch across slippery rock, our trail blazed with stacks of red stone. I'd been on many hikes in my home state of Colorado, but never one marked in such a unique way.

Over the next week and many hours of hiking, we grew to rely on our ever-present stone guides.

As we hiked, we began to see cairns as much more than utilitarian markers along our path.

We began to see cairns as symbols of a well-balanced life.

We are not the first to see the cairn as a symbol of balance. Aesthetic cairns – cairns built as stone art rather than for navigation – are seen frequently in places of relaxation and meditation.

The symbol resonates even for those who are unfamiliar with its true navigational purpose. As a culture, we understand this natural yet man-made artifact as having meaning: of peace, of balance, of unity. It is a symbol that is both aesthetically pleasing and pragmatic.





Returning home from my Utah hike, the symbol of the cairn remained with me. Over the years this seed of a symbol has grown and become central to how I lead my life.

The symbol has provided comfort and guidance during difficult times and a point of focus when moving forward.

I've used the idea of the cairn to center my thinking and to bring peace and serenity to chaos. The symbol helps me focus while making difficult decisions and to keep my perspective when life has overwhelmed me to the point of drowning.

It has kept me looking forward in times of depression and allowed me to trace the path of my life to its current point.

The cairn is a concrete image – a touchstone – that I can hold in my mind as a point of meditation or as a simple reminder of how I want to live my life. The cairn has become a personal symbol in my quest to live a well-balanced life.

Through this book, I will share my ever-developing personal understanding of what has become a powerful symbol in my life.

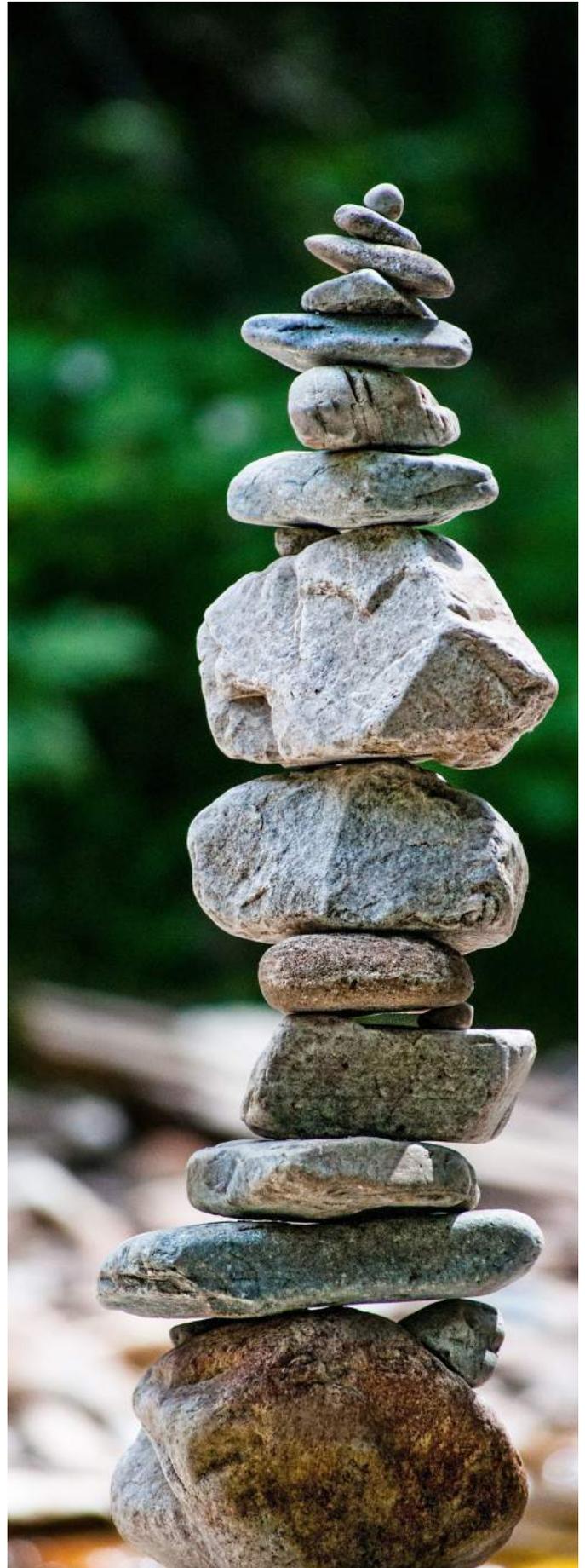
I will explore the cairn itself as a symbol of balance and stability that allows me to approach life's failures and limitations in a positive way. I will then link multiple cairns together as a symbol of my journey through life. This line of cairns allows me to visualize both my past and future while at the same time centering me in the present. I will expand on this idea to show how cairns help me make decisions when my life's path diverges. Finally, I will explore cairns as symbols of arrival, of celebration, and a point of rest.

My ideas surrounding cairns evolved naturally and are not based in any established religion or philosophy. Readers familiar with meditation and Zen philosophies may find harmony with some the ideas. Any correlations are merely fortuitous.

*The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.*

- Lao Tzu

...and a book begins with one word.



”

*The journey of a thousand  
miles begins with one step.*

LAO TZU

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# Balance

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# 2



Look at a cairn closely and you'll see that it is not just a random pile of rocks.

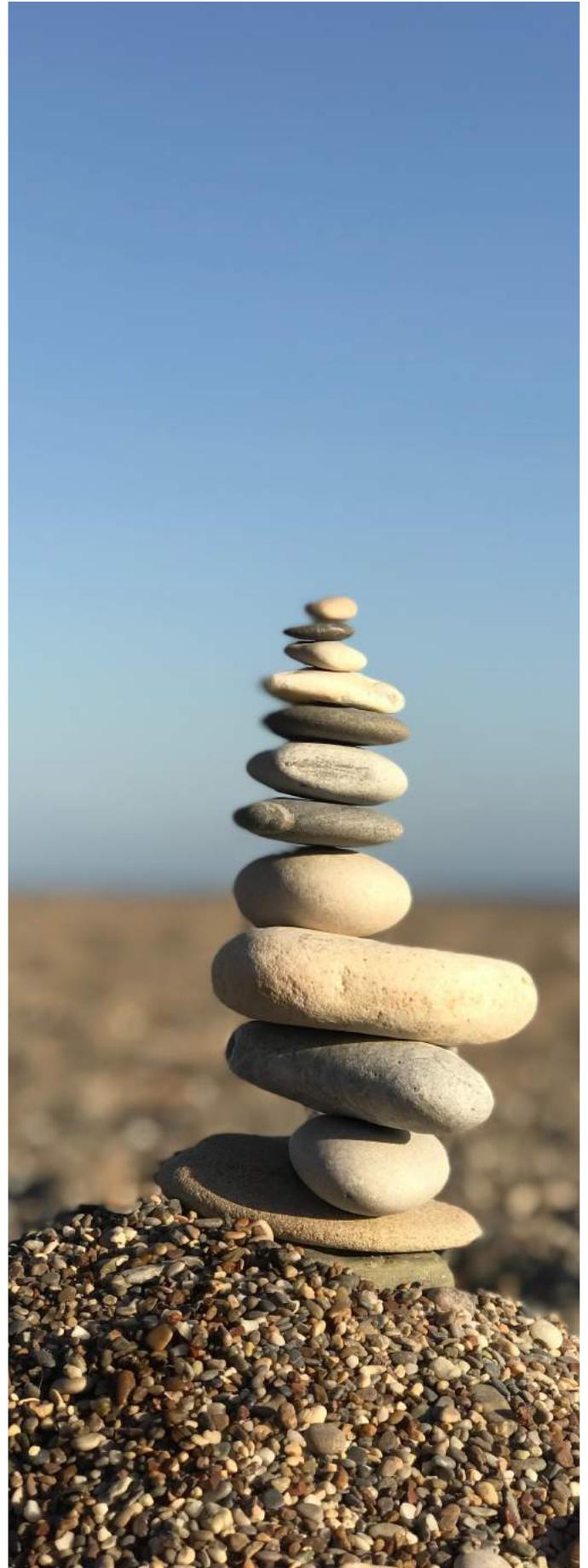
Cairns are individual works of balanced art. Hundreds, if not thousands, of cairns make a path, but each cairn is unique and each cairn has a story. It was built by hand from the materials scattered around; creating order from randomness.

Each cairn is individual, but the height and the stability of the cairn depends both on the foundation stone and how the other stones are placed.

Gravity pulls at the structure, but if the rocks are stacked in harmony, they will stand for years.

Cairns built on broad, level foundation stones will be strong and stable. One by one, stones are balanced on the first. Each rock is in harmony with the whole. If one stone is off center, if one stone is not broad enough to support the height, the cairn will fall. The higher and more complex the cairn, the more likely it will fall – and the more satisfying when it does not.

Life is about balance.



## About the Author

I am a musician, a college professor, and an award-winning photographer.

More importantly for this book, I am an introvert and have a life-long struggle with depression and anxiety.

When I can, I enjoy solitude in nature and capturing with my camera the beauty of the natural world.

I write this book not as an expert in mental health, but as practitioner of a philosophy – one developed on many a long hike. My goal is simply to share my understanding of this personal symbol and how it has stabilized and balanced my life. Every day I practice this philosophy. Some days I fail.

The cairn has given me one symbol to rely on in my sometimes chaotic world, a symbol I can return to. The more I reflect on this symbol, the more meaningful it becomes.

Some of the photos in this book are my own, others are from photographers who have experienced hikes in other areas of the world and their photos are in the public domain. My goal was to provide complementary images to the text that provide a center for meditation and a visual reminder of the symbol.

My photography may be viewed at Wits End Photography [www.witsendphotography.com](http://www.witsendphotography.com)



# PhotoYoga

This e-book is part of the PhotoYoga series.

PhotoYoga is about photography and the art of well-being.

PhotoYoga focuses on the balance between the technical and artistic sides of photography. It is about integrating photography into a well-balanced life that includes time for nature, for contemplation, for seeing all the world's beauty.

PhotoYoga brings together resources that help us to relax, center, and stretch:

relax.

Photography is about getting out into the world and enjoying life as it happens.

center.

Photography is about finding out about who you are and focusing on the world around you.

stretch.

PhotoYoga is about stretching yourself and your photographic skills to capture your creativity within the frame.

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