

TAIWAN STATE OF MIND

The Art of Personal Growth

Article by Steve Kokker

I would venture a guess that many GTH newsletter readers would list personal growth pretty high up on their list of life priorities. Serious tea drinkers just tend to be 'that way'. The leafy path of Cha Dao has many resting places along its way for activities which lead to (using a loaded term) "self improvement": self-discipline, contemplation, seeing oneself clearly, mastering one's thoughts, reading, working on mutually beneficial and non-drama-laden personal relationships, and a host of other practices which nudge body, soul and mind a few notches upwards from our *samsara*-infused lives.

Yet disciplined practice aside, very often personal growth has much to do with just being at the right time and place. By being in nourishing circumstances just when we're open and receptive to receiving the nourishment, we offer a chance to inner transformations already in process to just... *happen* by themselves. Kinda beautiful, huh?

Of course, we can take the stance that there are no such things as perfect situations, that any situation we happen to find ourselves in is by definition the right one for us; growth happens in how we choose to respond to the present moment in whatever form it takes – do we fight against it, grin and bear it, transform it or cherish it, surrender to it?

However, there is something profound, even spectacular about finding ourselves smack in the middle of what feels like the best possible set of circumstances for a given moment. Those times always feel as if they were meticulously choreographed by an incredible set of coincidences. We smile and shake our heads and think, "I couldn't have planned it more perfectly!" We think back to that old Police album, *Synchronicity*, and wonder if it's correct to apply the word to our case. Very likely, though, we did our bit to find ourselves just there, just then. Author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would have it that in such circumstances, we are fully in 'flow' - whether we know it or not. This is a process we are actively engaged in, not a passive recipient of.

The art of personal growth therefore is partially about just showing up! Having a sense of when and where to be, and with whom (and conversely when not to be somewhere) is an art in and of itself. So too is the ability to remain open to that which is offered to us, knowing that to miss an opportunity is possibly to miss it forever.

Easier said than done. There are clues and signs around us all the time as to the inner changes our bod-

ies/organisms/spirits feel they're ready to make, and yet we can remain astoundingly, willfully blind to them. How often does fate knock at the door, hands gently outstretched with a kind gift of, say, insight or experience, and we simply, out of fear, pride, ignorance or just because our iPods are on too loud, ignore it?

Tea as Life Transformer

I've now twice visited the Tea Sage Hut for month-long stays I would describe as nothing short of transformative. The first visit especially I'd call life-changing. Of course it's true, as my friends note, that I tend towards heavy usage of superlatives (every week the number of world's best tea/chocolate/film/song I've ever tasted/seen/heard grows exponentially), and I am often awash with the mere experience of experiencing. The Russians have a great word for this to which the English translation 'impressionable' doesn't quite do justice: '*vpechatlitelny*' (one who deeply takes in each experience). Yet hyperbole notwithstanding, "life-changing" is not overstating the effects of such a powerful teacher as tea, especially when its teachings come at exactly the right time and place.

I recently ended my second month at the Hut and am now back in the saddle of my regular life of busy-ness, head still spinning from all of what I learned and felt there. I wasn't alone in this feeling either. Although the Hut is open to casual visitors who wish to stay for a few hours or days and have a few seeds planted in their consciousness for later blossoming, it does seem to attract people who have found their way there at... just the right time and place. Beautiful souls who have come with emptied cups and open hearts, open to learning and growing and to letting tea be their guide on that journey.

I close my eyes and I see one such *Cha Ren*, all spirit and love, who has selflessly turned his own apartment into a tea center of sorts in order to spread good feeling to others in collaboration with the Leaf; another whose personal transformations have blossomed into a selfless dedication to farming the earth and soil so that others have an opportunity of sharing in unspoiled nature; yet another whose intimate, meditative approach to tea underscores his desire to spark positive transformation in others via tea drinking sessions; still another has already created a donation-based tea salon at his university, an oasis for others to enjoy Being, in company of tea.

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These people, and others, are inspirational models of selfless living, examples of the good which can come of being other-focused, disciplined and dedicated. They've let tea—patient, forgiving tea—to be their teacher, guide and friend. So here comes the kicker: Cha Dao offers deep lessons about the value of practice, presence, self-discipline and sharing—all of which are invaluable in the very art of living. *How we do anything is how we do everything*; the Way of Tea is the way of living and being, and so much more than just tea preparation. Making tea becomes the portal to living a better life, becoming a better person.

One dear friend of mine here in Estonia who has found tea a powerful transformational tool recently wrote to me:

“I am everyday now doing a long tea ‘session’. What an inexhaustible well of nuances and information, and in so many dimensions! Each time, it’s like meeting with a new character who has something to teach. Some are like old friends, casual and comforting. Others are like strict teachers, hard to please, punishing inattentiveness and sloppiness with bitterness and distaste.

I’ve been through many lessons. Some wonderful, some rather unpleasant. And not just about taste.

But also smell, lighting, my posture, how I hold a cup, how I breathe, my motivations and intentions...”

That tea can teach us such things is perhaps an obvious lesson, and it’s a lesson also learned when applying gong fu to any activity we choose, but it’s one that becomes crystal clear at the Hut.

Tea Sage Hut

So how does one ‘learn’ all this at the Hut? Certainly not in a directed, obvious way. At first I thought (my mind might have even hoped) that a daily schedule might look something like this:

*9am - 10.15 Yixing pots: History and Spectroscopy Analysis of Mineral Composition

*10.30 - 12.00 Gong Fu Party Tricks III (for those who have completed Level II)

*12.00 – 13.15 Qi Gong, Feng Shui and Selfless Living in 8 Easy Steps

...etc...

Structured education is something the mind can comfortably understand; it’s easier to allow growth and learning via the mind than via the heart or soul—





areas which tend to reside outside our mind-delineated comfort zones. As most of us have already learned, the deepest and most lasting growth occurs outside of these comfort zones, and so too do the most meaningful tea/life lessons occur outside of a classroom-like setting. As many beneficial discussions at the Hut happened in the kitchen, while laughing hysterically at silly jokes, on tea shopping jaunts, or in meditative silence as they did in the gong fu tea room asking pointed questions.

While my first visit resulted in me connecting to an approach to tea that I had unwittingly been searching for over a long period of time, this second visit solidified my dedication to the tradition as practiced at the Hut (all of what you read about in these newsletters). The two main themes which seemed to follow me around this time were the need to surrender to one's own growth (that things in life which make us most uncomfortable are just those which can enact the greatest changes if we avail ourselves to them, an often painful process we need to surrender to); and the need to clear our lives of debris and unnecessary distractions in order to give room for those beneficial changes to occur. (We often clutter our lives with responsibilities, object, and people in order to sabotage the more difficult process of personal growth.)

Sure, there is also *a lot* of really useful, practi-

cal tea instruction which *happens* at the center, but it exactly just happens—it's not scheduled or forced. The issues and themes which arise spontaneously tend to be just those that the listeners are most in need of hearing. In other words, they happen at just the right time and place... like everything does when we're in tune with what our higher selves are trying to tell us.

Back here in Estonia, then, I pour a cup for the brothers and sisters I met who are on parallel journeys of development with tea their spirit guide. The taste is bitter... and oh, so sweet...

