

I recently had the opportunity of meeting someone again who I had not seen for some time, and it reminded me of the way in which we can change without recognizing it. Such meetings are almost always a bit strange. If the encounter is brief and superficial, you most likely will only notice the physical changes: lost or gained weight, children, hair, wrinkles, style of clothes, and so on. If the encounter leads to lunch or dinner or something else, (tea perhaps?) then you have a chance to dig a bit deeper into the more personal changes they've undergone. In this case, I had a chance to witness both; first the surprise at the physical changes, and next, over tea, the discovery of the deeper internal changes.

Now in this case, although there were some very apparent physical differences, the time-frame was short enough that these were pretty superficial, nothing to inspire a double-take. But as we got to talking and spending a bit of time together, I quickly realized that this person had changed tremendously on the inside, and furthermore that they didn't seem to be aware of it. It is always easier to see something in someone else than it is to see it in yourself. This is almost the only good reason to spend any time looking at anyone other than yourself at all. I try to make it my practice that whenever I spot something in another person, I then look for it in myself, and this is exactly why this practice is important. When something is within me, that means I live with it every day, and the things I see every day are easily overlooked; but when you look at someone else, or haven't seen someone in a while, their qualities or changes really stand out. This is important because without recognition of our own changes, we not only stagnate in a delusion of a constant identity, but we are also limited in our ability to empower ourselves and make the most meaningful contribution to the world that we can.

I realized that when I look in the mirror each day to brush my teeth, without a thought there is this recognition happening: "That's me, I'm the same as I was yesterday!" Or maybe sometimes there is a specific thought there. I notice that pimple rising on my nose or that my hair is doing something funny it wasn't doing before, but these tiny physical changes never amount to me thinking: "Wow I'm a totally different person!" And this isn't even touching the deeper, inner aspects of myself that are also developing and building too slowly to see. Yet there can be no doubt; I am growing, I am changing, and just as I see so clearly the changes in another, if I pay closer attention I should be able to find

the changes in myself. But where to look? Where to find a mirror that can peer into those depths? Why tea, of course!

This is one of the many beauties of tea as the great connector, the bridge between the spiritual and the mundane, the Earth and the Heavens. With roots drinking in the power of one and leaves outstretched to bask in the power of the other, tea touches both sides, giving each cup the capacity to reflect either one in its depths, depending only on our desire to see. And look I have. As it happens, gauging my progress in tea is really easy, because I have a Wu De around. And I have noticed that whereas initially he used to do things like point suddenly behind me and scream, "MY GOD! LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU!" and toss the tea over his shoulder, he later progressed into actually drinking it while appearing to struggle painfully to achieve a deep meditative state. Nowadays, I've finally risen to the level where he merely grimaces and turns green from time to time! But since this is too easy, I suppose we should take a look elsewhere as well.

Now on the surface level—the level of pimples and haircuts—I frankly can't see the differences in my tea. This is the tea that I make for myself. It seems to me that I've always made it about this well; I know I don't enjoy drinking my own tea any more than I did before. And if I was learning about tea only at this level, the level of making it for my own enjoyment, this would be the limit of what I could get out of it. But this is a tradition of *servicing* tea, and I think I've just realized a new aspect of why this is so important, literally just now. Because it is only in serving tea to others that I can really witness the deep and meaningful changes my tea has obviously undergone when I wasn't paying attention. It seems so obvious now, but serving tea is the insight into the profound side of tea I was looking for!

I can remember when I first started making tea, admittedly with no intention of service at all, and the way the tea sessions would go. For one thing, the tea ceremony itself was just one drawn-out procession of whatever I wanted: the cups I wanted, the tea I wanted, the pot, the music, and so on. There was not even an inkling of the idea that these decisions should be made with the tea (my only guest at first) in mind. I didn't even recognize the tea as a guest at that time. I was very fortunate that I spent almost no time at all in this phase before finding the school here and beginning to learn that tea had something greater to offer, if you were willing to in turn offer it to others.



After that, things started to happen. I suddenly found that occasionally, opportunities to make tea for other tea-lovers or passersby began to arise. At first, my habit of treating tea as a casual pleasure pervaded, and the sessions weren't so much moving or transforming as they were pleasant gatherings of friends; energetically they were on the same level as getting together for a casual lunch at a spot with some good live music perhaps. I can't say that I remember the specific session in which it first happened, but at some point the sessions started to change. There were periods of prolonged silence even with guests who were not tea drinkers, and who were typically very chittery and chattery. There were sessions where three kettles were drunk in meditation and total silence, even in the absence of music, with more experienced tea people who nonetheless didn't always make such sessions their habit all the time. To me, the tea tasted pretty much the same, but clearly it was changing significantly.

Although these sessions were powerful, I still didn't see any far-reaching impact arising from them. They seemed to be like any other moments to my eye; moments of presence and awareness yes, but moments that passed away into oblivion like any other moments, never to be heard from again. They appeared to have great power at the time, but no power later on. I know better now. I will never forget, however, the first time I had the privilege of serving tea and finally witnessing an impact, a clear and lasting influence, that arose directly out of the tea.

Another student and I were driving a new guest who had just arrived at the train station to the center. We stopped at home to pick something up on the way when it started to rain, so we decided to wait it out over tea. The rain, chilliness of the evening, and presence of a guest led me to choose a deep and powerful tea, and it took only one bowl to quiet all the questions, observations, and commentary which naturally arise

29 when someone has newly arrived in a foreign country seeking something. After some time spent in the silent communion, I had grown comfortable in my capacity to serve, so I offered to teach our guest how to hold his bowl. This simple and practical lesson then naturally developed into a deeper lesson about our practice of treating our bowl with respect and care, listening to how it wishes to be picked up, set down, filled and emptied, is important because eventually this practice will spill over into the way we relate to all objects, and beyond. That's just a paraphrase, but the point isn't to try to convey that lesson here. I remember how at the time, the words just spilled out of me without thought, and later I realized that I had listened to the same lesson in almost the same words many times over the last few months at the center. But the truly miraculous thing about that session was that after the lesson was given, our guest was completely transformed, and not just for a moment.

It's not so unusual for a group of people sitting down, at one of our outings perhaps, to listen to such an instruction and handle their bowls more carefully for one, two, maybe three steepings, then go right back to the way they were doing it before, or some haphazard way more often than not. But not only did our guest proceed to pick up his first bowl after that lesson with every cell of his body straining to be in tune with it, he set it down that way as well. Then he did it again, and again, and again... I watched in amazement as he visited us for nearly two weeks and not only did he never once fail to pick up and set down his bowl in this way, but I could see he was doing his best to practice "relating" to other "objects" in his life instead of "using" them. During his visit, he asked us to perform a ceremony for him symbolic of his desire to be a part of this tradition and make it a part of his life even where he lives now on the other side of the world, and he is one of our dearest brothers today.

Even more incredibly, as recently as two days ago, I was present to witness the continuing repercussions of that tea session. The third student who was drinking tea with us that day, another resident here who had already heard the same teaching given almost as often as I had, witnessing the impact that taking in and living the lesson had on our guest, began practicing it for the first time as a result! We've been drinking tea together for a few months since then, and neither of us, I must admit, have picked up every single bowl with that same level of reverence each time. But every once in a while I have witnessed her reach for the bowl, then stop and remember as the hand slows down its approach, grasping the bowl gently like a baby bird, or setting it down as such after drinking. In those moments I always find myself transfixed, as I realize that this act has not only carried on and changed the lives of those two people in a way that is as clear as day before my eyes, but it has come full circle and

impacted me as well. I too slow down and reach gently for that bowl, eyes moist in the recognition of the power of tea. And all this is really only a small microcosm of what really came out of that session and that whole visit.

It may seem such a small thing that we overlook it; someone changing the way they pick up a bowl, which then changes the way someone else picks up a bowl, so on... This is like tea served to someone who was angry a moment ago and finds their anger dissipating; or tea served to someone who loves to talk endlessly about trivialities now finding themselves in silence for a few minutes of communion with themselves. Perhaps the former will get angry again later and the latter will be chattering away again. But the truth is always deeper and vaster, stretching far beyond our ability to see in linear time. It's important to remember this and have faith that even when we can't see the impact of a tea session that the impact is there. It's also important to remember to polish our mirrors and deepen our practice so that we can better see the impact we are having, ever reevaluating ourselves and our practice.

Above all, don't sell yourself short in an affected attempt at humility. This does nobody any good. If we don't recognize our own growth, how can we put our abilities to work? And never let yourself be convinced that your tea isn't making a difference. Tiny changes add up, good or ill; they are drops in a jar. Given enough time, a person, a community, a society, a culture, the world, the galaxy and eventually the whole Universe are transformed...

