



hose familiar melancholy notes which always accompany the close of a Northern Hemisphere summer are now in full symphony: shorter days, suddenly; soft, warm air with chilly, foreboding undercurrents; bright sunshine above but the first yellowing, fallen leaves below. This minor chord season is always a good time to reflect on the period which just ended. What did Summer bring us? What did we learn, how did we grow during it? Hopefully there was mega fun, direct doses of Vitamin D, skinny dips and hot kisses. And hopefully we shifted somewhat in a forward motion.

The end of Summer for me has always been a bit like New Year's Eve is supposed to be—a period of reflection, assessing lessons learned or recalling loves lived and lost. The approaching Autumn has a dreamy, otherworldly feel that allows one to wallow a tad in memories. This year I have especially much to ponder and recall. Summer offered up a blend of emotional highs and lows I had not experienced in many years (I listened too closely to the Sirens' song and jumped overboard) along with the concomitant opportunities for inner exploration and growth. During such delectable feasts one tends to gorge—and purge.

It was a summer of digging deep, not always liking what was found or felt but ultimately feeling lighter for having several unneeded layers lifted and chiseled away. My only true and constant companion throughout was tea. And my deepest tea sessions, indeed among the most fantastic of my life, all took place **outdoors**.

I'm not sure why it took me so long to get it all together and enjoy preparing tea outside, other than lack of imagination and fear of grass stains, but now that I have, there's no turning back. I want to encourage all our readers to get out there and enjoy whatever last warm days there are in the company of a faithful friend who loves unconditionally and brings a depth of comfort and clarity which few two-legged pals can muster.

Here in Estonia one is never far from a forested patch to sit down in, plant one's *muladhara* squarely down onto living, pulsating earth and plunge into an experience which finds oneself in a dance among the five elements. Preparing and drinking tea in such an environment reconnects with an ancient tradition in which people – tea masters and simple folk alike—collected water, made a fire and brewed one of Nature's gifts in the same environment in which it had grown.

Tea helped make the connection between Earth and Heaven through the physical self immediate and transcendent.

For many centuries, human interaction with the tea plant, whether in tending to its leaves or drinking its nectar, likely happened in the company of a gentle breeze, shaded from the sun by treetops, and among snapping twigs and buzzing bugs. If not forced to take shelter from inclement weather, people naturally gravitated towards drinking tea in the environment in which it had been born.

The How & Why

What do you need for a proper tea picnic? A gas burner (the butane-powered, inexpensive kind available at almost any hardware or camping shop); a kettle (glass which can handle direct flame, clay or stainless steel); a teapot; as many cups as friends with you, and into which you can fully pour out the pot's contents; a few tea towels; tea; fresh water (ideally spring); and sharpened senses.

Almost any spot will do, even a public park, if that's all that's available. Better still a forest, wooded area, beachfront, cliff, bog, tundra... the more Nature—the more open space the better. When wandering around looking for an appropriate space, try to let the spot pick you; try to sense which space wishes to host your tea session. Let your inner voice guide you to a place which feels right.

Tea has a way of relaxing inner tensions such that one's true voice speaks out in security and comfort. Most of us have experienced such beautiful unfoldings of the soul during tea sessions, where suddenly the veils of mind noise seem to part, masks fall off, the heart opens up and things are said (or comfortably left unspoken) which would otherwise not be expressed. Often, a connection between the people present becomes palpable, firm, comfortable. The most beautiful gift we can offer others is a space in which they can truly be themselves, and drinking tea is one of the most powerful ways to offer such a space.

When tea is shared outdoors, its soul-opening aspects appear to be magnified; that which tea naturally encourages in people seems to be enhanced and deepened just by being in natural, unthreatening surroundings. If tea generally relaxes the spirit to allow thoughts and feelings to surface, then this effect is magnified by the natural elements.

Have Tea Will Travel

This is true even when by oneself, and especially true when sharing tea with another. Sometimes, what transpires during tea sessions is unexpected, pure magic, like gaining a privileged view into the deeper aspects of others, and certainly also of yourself. There are times when it seems as if pure emotions, kept under lock and key in remote, distant areas, suddenly come bubbling up to the surface.

Amazing too, when making tea on a forest floor, the tea and teaware seamlessly blend into their surroundings. Tea leaves placed into a bowl or pot look as if they could have been picked up from the ground: the Japanese tea scoop I used once got lost among the pieces of darkened birch bark lying near it. It's easy to believe that you are drinking up the very surroundings.

Sketches of Tea

This summer, I was privy to partake in more such beautiful tea moments than at any time previous, and most of these occurred outside.

I confess I'm a bit of a romantic when it comes to sharing moments of intimate connection with others. My memory isn't great for things I don't place much importance on (that means lots!), but moments of interpersonal connection stay etched in my mind very,

very clearly. A feeling of connection is what I appreciate perhaps most deeply in life, be it with oneself, other people or Nature. If not attached too much, dependent on or longing for such moments, they are indeed the times I feel most alive.

A few scattered memories of pine needles, friends and The Leaf...

On the last day of a road trip with a friend, both of us were tired and cranky when we found ourselves in one of southern Estonia's most beautiful landscapes, the over 350 million years old sandstone escarpments at Taevaskoda. The primeval thick forest and slowly flowing river lent the air sweetness and sharpness; it was a beautiful, warm day and yet, being tired and cranky, mind noise filtered out much of this beauty. We found a preternaturally pure spring source there which the Estonians revere enough to term "Mother Spring" and were elated by this and the crystal waters which bubbled from it.

Fighting a temptation to drive on, we sat on an elevated patch of pine forest, just twenty meters away from this spring, shielded from passersby by a wall of trees. I prepared a spectacular Bulang *gushu sheng* Pu-erh, at first a little too intensely. However, bitter tastes, it is said, have a way of dissolving the walls which shield closed hearts, and we instinctively let the tea do this

7



Have Tea Will Travel

Work. The words spoken there are now forgotten, offered up to the forest spirits. But the subtle feeling of inner shift which occurred is still very real to me. We spoke, then we didn't; we listened to the birds, to the ducks in the distant river, and to other people's expressions of glee upon discovering the spring, or we just looked up at the immense trees towering above us and our petty concerns. Drinking this sublime tea with water we had ourselves fetched just meters away, sitting directly on the ground which had nourished the water with its primeval energy, and feeling ourselves relax into the tea's balancing energies was pure bliss. We both left the space at peace, mind noise gone, back on track, hearts opened.

Another memorable session happened in the middle of a bog on the border between two of the least populated countries in Europe, Estonia and Latvia. It was a hot, sunny summer day (even by Northern European standards) and we were the only people in this vast space of wetlands, of short, tentative trees, mossy carpets of venus flytraps and blueberries. It seemed like there were no artificial or human noises in a vast radius of space around us, and we reveled in the sounds of the breeze and of mammoth dragonflies buzzing around us. This time, sipping bowl tea, shirtless by the side of a pitch-black bog lake made us feel as if we were melting into our surreal surroundings.

Another time I brought my tea paraphernalia to a boisterous Russian beach party: little kids, teens and a few overly dramatic adults included. A Buddhist temple green tea, plucked just a few months prior, was greeted unenthusiastically at first, served on the sand... and then worked its magic. I soon was circled by curious faces, and one teenage girl who didn't want even a sip at first ("I don't like tea at all!") ended up drinking the most, at least 15 little cups-full, smiling, "I had no idea tea could taste like this! I feel great!"

There were many other sessions: with coworkers in a park, forming a long-lasting bond when we 'should' have been working; with a normally boisterous fifteen-year-old boy who sat still, calm, focused and smiling throughout; by myself, pondering inner questions in a forest or smiling contentedly up at the clouds, huddled snugly between trees and caterpillars in a thick park.

When the Brew Doesn't Work Its Magic Quickly

Although the simple act of sitting and drinking tea in novel surroundings will tend to relax people, if you find yourself with someone unable to be calm or who is chattering a bit too much, one way to instill a peaceful shared space is to get them to focus on the sounds around you. Gently nudge them to listen

to the ambient sounds. For example, squint your eyes a tad and ask, out of curiosity, 'Cool! How many different kinds of birds can you hear?' Or, 'Hey, can you hear the sound of the wind in the treetops?' Or, help turn their focus on the feeling of sitting on the ground, the temperature of the breeze, the witch-on-a-broom-shaped cloud passing by overhead, the smells which waft to and fro, etc. Guiding someone gently to focus on their physical sensations has a way of calming the noisy mind.

Or, make tea the focus. If someone keeps asking questions all the time or feels the need to tell you things, allow them some release, nod gently and then close your eyes after taking a sip and say, 'Hmm, after you take a sip, see if you can follow the tea down inside and just see where it goes—deep down, back up to the head, into the chest...?' That usually helps them be still and focus, at least for a while.

If even that doesn't work, then that's OK too. Maybe it's meant to be a more chatty session. Just mind yourself and keep yourself centered and peaceful, and that will transform the others more than any technique will.

I can't wait for some winter tea picnics in the snow!

