

UNIVERSE IN A BOWL

Article by Kaiya

A few weeks ago, I traveled south in Taiwan to a new Vipassana Center. Ten days later, I was given a ride to the nearest train station by a kind fellow meditator. As we drove along through the beautiful scenery, I learned that she was the owner of an English school, and she was looking for a teacher. But this wasn't a normal English job; it would have been a dream come true for me a few years ago, the best job in the country by my standards. She wanted someone with a passion for the outdoors who would inspire Taiwanese children to interact more with the natural world, to design hands-on coursework and go on weekly field trips, hiking, biking, identifying birds and animal tracks, farming, vacations abroad, you name it. The pay would be generous, and every manner of outdoor activities would be at my fingertips. Add to that free room and board, close proximity to the Vipassana center, working for a fellow meditator—my mouth was watering in spite of having spent the last ten days eliminating the old habit patterns of craving!

I spoke to my new friend at length about her vision, describing my own childhood and education. I had the incredible good fortune to be born to a mother who was not only a lover of Nature, but also willing to sacrifice all of her time and energy to my education. She schooled me at home and instilled in me a deep love for and a sense of connection to Nature. As a result, I spent little time indoors. I finished school long before public schools got out each day and always spent those hours outside in the woods. I built forts, tracked wild animals, collected grasshoppers, butterflies, beetles, snakes, lizards, turtles, frogs, fish (I even had a pet bee who didn't fly more than two feet away from me for a week). I knew half the Audbon Society's field books for Florida wildlife by heart, down to how many scales there are on a female six-lined racerunner's tail. We took lots of field trips and our family vacations were always spent camping. My heart has always gone out to my Taiwanese students in this regard.

The education system in this country is incredibly unfriendly towards the development of anything other than academic skills. This naturally compounds the tendency in all developed societies for children to become attached to technology. Everywhere you go, it seems children are unplugging themselves from machines just long enough to plug themselves into another one. Seeing my enthusiasm, the obvious question

was: "So why don't you move on down here and take the job?" I did my best to explain what we are doing in Miao Li and why it's so important; and that I couldn't possibly leave, even for the best job in Taiwan. But, I'm pretty sure she was still giving me the *How can making tea for people possibly be that important* face when she dropped me off.

Later, during the long train ride back to Miaoli, I realized I was still craving. I started looking at this job, and what it had to offer. First, I had to face the fact that part of my attraction was pure selfishness. For many years of my life, most of my pleasure came in the form of canoeing, rock climbing, mountain biking, and other such activities; activities I have sacrificed, all of which and more were abundantly available in and around the location of the job. Realizing this was nothing more than a craving for experiences, I was able to put that aspect of my craving down pretty quickly. But it reminded me how vital it is to do work that offers something deeper, not only for myself but for whom-ever benefits from my work. And this job was indeed offering something on that deeper level, something incredibly important in fact; reconnection to Nature. It's something we talk about often around here.

Living in cities, eating processed foods, butchered meats, prepared meals and packaged snacks, surrounded by concrete, plastic and technology, the majority of people on Earth today are surrounded by mind-made landscapes. An awareness of our connection to and dependency on the Earth is dwindling. There is a sense that we take care of ourselves, that our technological creations are our own, that Nature and technology are separate, but the truth is that everything we live on and depend on comes from Nature in one form or another. As long as this sense of disconnection grows, humanity is in great danger, and it's incredibly important—vitaly important—that we do whatever is necessary to rekindle that sense of connection. So where better to begin than with the children of one of the most technology-sick countries in the world? On top of that, I argued, I'd be close to a Vipassana Center, working for a Vipassana meditator, who told me she'd be supportive of time off for retreats and volunteer work throughout the year. This would mean that I could also supplement my service to the kids with a more purely selfless service to a high cause indeed. After all, there aren't many contributions to human consciousness you



*Gorgeous Tea-inspired Photography
by Adam Yasmin*

could assign greater value to than helping people come out of their craving and aversion and attaining equanimity.

Thus, with a ten-day course and all the benefits of Vipassana looming large in my mind, plus an hour-long drive through gorgeous countryside amidst descriptions of a really attractive opportunity, I did my best to turn my mind back to Tea, and Miao Li. Frankly, after the last ten days it seemed almost a Universe away, though in fact I was nearly home. Perhaps my ego was seeking a bit of revenge for the punishment I'd just put it through, or maybe it was just the impressionability of an emptied mind, but I was biased towards the dream job. My first thoughts were doubts of the depth of what we offer to guests at the Tea Sage Hut. "Ok," I thought, "but my life has totally changed from being a full-time student there, there's no doubt about that. Aha!" The dream job debater quickly seized upon this: How selfish you are, working for your own personal growth but offering less to those you serve!

But then I started remembering my progress down the path of Cha Dao. That first bowl of tea, which eventually led to a plane ticket to Taiwan, which then led to drinking tea every day, removing a couch and buying tatami, and eventually clearing out

a whole room and having a place to pray and meditate instead of a place to watch television. I realized that every step of this process was actually a huge change in my life, representing a major shift in my consciousness. Although it may be true that there are those who come here, have an experience and move on, I have seen dozens and dozens of you reading these words now with my own eyes setting their feet on this same path of transformation I've walked. I've seen the shifts in consciousness and the changes in lifestyles; I've seen the shifts from self-service to greater and greater service to others. I've seen people come with a bunch of money to buy themselves tea, going home having spent the money on tea but planning to give it away and serve it instead of keeping it for themselves. And if that isn't enough, just look at the existence of Global Tea Hut itself. So many of you have not even visited this place yet, and still you feel its resonance and necessity so deeply that you part with a bit of your precious energy every month and send it our way so that we can continue to do the work we are doing here!

One of the magical qualities of tea is that it works non-verbally. It seeps into the cracks and joints of our bodies and souls, filling them with light and warmth and love and wisdom, whether we know it or

not. The more open we are, the more deeply it penetrates. In Vipassana, the teacher again and again reminds us, however, to work ‘intelligently’ with a ‘perfect understanding’ of the technique. It works on its own, but it is wise to take a closer look at what you are practicing from time to time. Otherwise, you may find yourself practicing mechanically, without inspiration, or even incorrectly, which means you aren’t open and aren’t absorbing much of your tea. Tea wants to help you, but you also have to help yourself to get the full benefit.

In truth, you’d find it a much easier writing a list of the deeply important truths not found in tea than those that are. Actually, I’m only saying that to be open-minded. Personally, I can’t think of even one, so if you’re like me your work would be over before it started. The expression “The Universe in a bowl” is one I’ve heard more than a few times. But how often do I actually take the time to gaze consciously into that vastness as I drink my tea, and how often do I simply allow it to do all the work and enjoy the sense of expansion that pervades my whole being as I drink? Both are important.

This life is extraordinarily brief. Where are the decades that have passed me by? No more than one blink, one breath, and now here I am, in this moment, and so it will go and in one more such blink, one more such breath, I will find myself at my death. Our relationship to the end of our life is directly related to our relationship to our life right now. But with all the hustle and bustle of daily activities, daily mind, it’s incredibly difficult to learn anything or practice anything amidst all the noise. This is one of the reasons for meditation: it’s a quiet, controlled space in which to practice facing all the difficulties and pleasures of daily life, learning to face them with balance and poise and harmony. But we have to learn to carry that practice out into the real world, and tea is an extraordinary tool for doing just that.

Practice being born anew each time you sit down to tea, conscious of the delicate and ephemeral moments of a tea session. As with our own lives, the life of this session shall pass quickly and then dissipate, and our task is to learn and grow as much as we can from the lessons that are offered to us in the time between our births and deaths. For me, if I’ve chosen a session of conscious practice, I find that it is often best to look at a single aspect and focus on that, but don’t get stuck in any one way of doing things. For example, I might notice that although the tea in the pot is the same, every single steeping, indeed even each sip within each steeping, is totally unique. I stay with this truth from sip to sip and don’t wander from it. How do I relate to this? Do I have a favorite steeping, one I wish I could drink repeatedly instead of accepting ‘inferior’ ones? Or do

I rejoice in its uniqueness, setting it free, allowing the brevity of the experience to intensify its sweetness and beauty? Do I cling to it, trying to possess it, wishing it could last forever? From there, how do I relate to my friends, loved ones and fellow human beings on a day-to-day basis? Do I treat them like they are the same person every day or treat them differently depending on if their behavior toward me is the ‘steeping’ I prefer the most? Or do I set them all free so I can rejoice in their eternal rebirth, their ephemeral nature, the sweetness and intensity of their Being, without any preferences or attachment to which face they are wearing today?

I guarantee that if you notice you aren’t drinking your tea in this way, you will also find you are not relating to the world in this way either. And the lessons go on and on: pleasure, craving, aversion, service, sensitivity, equanimity, brevity, humility, respect, listening, presence, peace, laughter, love, connection, joy, purity, Nature, birth, death, beauty, all these and more can be practiced and mastered through tea. In fact, why not challenge yourself? Take a good hard look at yourself, a moral inventory. Find some lesson or positive quality that you are lacking in your life, and then find it in your tea. Or even just think of a lesson at random that you haven’t realized before or can’t see right now. Whatever it is, it’s in there, and once you begin to recognize that your tea is steeped in the wisdom you are seeking, you will begin to find it is giving you the answers to your life as well. Drinking tea daily, conscious of this, has the power to lead one to life wisdom.

For a few moments, I really did want to take that job, and really wanted to find an avenue of thought to justify doing so. I do think it’s incredibly important for someone to do the work my friend is trying to do, and I am even trying to find her a good teacher to fit the bill. And Vipassana has unquestionably been one of the most important changes in my life: an incredibly important tool. In fact, we strongly encourage all our students to go and incorporate it in their lives. But for me, it’s tea that fills in the gaps and breathes the full breadth of life into my practice. Tea is my rung of the ladder we are all building to raise the consciousness of this planet. Tea is just my rung. You can’t say one rung is more or less important than another one, because they all have to be there for the ladder to be complete. Whatever you are doing, there are people climbing through your own rung on the ladder every day. Use your tea practice wisely to deepen your understanding of why you do what you do, to find the deepness in it, and see to it that you make the most of every opportunity, whenever someone comes climbing along.

Fortunately, I was able to transmute all the doubt, craving and selfish energy generated by this experience into tremendous inspiration and increased dedication to our work here; and the desire, of course,



to share. I want to thank you for this opportunity. There is a great debt I owe to each and every one of you every month we meet beneath this roof and share this tea. As with meditation, tea is a training ground for daily life; and as with daily life, everyone is completely in control of what they get out of it. When a guest comes here, they make the choice where they will fall on the spectrum. It is our fervent hope that all of you will make that physical journey one day, and that in the meantime you find the answers in these teas.

Am I alive to collect pleasant experiences, or actualize deep soul-changing wisdom? Am I passively wandering through life or actively learning how to live it? It's up to me and me alone. Just as I can choose to sit down and merely take pleasure in tea, extracting

what I want from it, or become a student of the Leaf, bowing my head with respect and a desire to learn. In the meantime, it is my great honor and pleasure to remain here, holding the space necessary for any of you to come at any time and make your choice with each cup and every bowl, just as you can choose to—right now, in this moment!

