

# ZEN & TEA

Article by Wu De



Zen is limitless. Zen outdoes itself, outstrips itself in direct experience. Ideas, concepts and teachings, however true, are but stones thrown at the stars. In Zen, the words are ‘fingers pointing to the moon’ and not to be confused with the moon itself. The teachings are not the Truth (capital T) only the fingers pointing at it. And the Truth, like the moon, takes up the whole sky, so it can be pointed to from so many angles, perspectives and positions. You can point up at the moon from even the most remote island, the mountaintop or valley, jungle or desert. And this is why Zen is more of an art than an ideology, for each Zen master points to that direct experience in a unique way. And oh how many ways there have been: from wild, outrageous masters to humble, reserved and disciplined ones; those who spoke plainly and simply and those who spoke only in witty riddles; and from those who devoted themselves to service to those who lived distant and carefree. Zen is not about being a certain type of person or living in any certain way. It is about being who you truly are.

The reason Zen has found its way into so many arts, including tea, is that it has never been about passing on a special set of beliefs, ideas, dogmas, rites or rituals. Zen is a direct experience. And the Truth is often more easily hinted at in metaphors and poetry than it is in literal speech, which is not to say that Zen hasn’t ever been communicated in the simple and ordinary—it has. But art, like Zen, is often nonverbal; and if it is sacred art then it too points to a direct experience. The Zen master isn’t trying to teach a particular thing; only to use what is at hand to instigate an awakening of harmony in the student. Arts like tea often are capable of this transmission in ways that words could never be. Because it transcends rationality, many Zen masters are famous for behaving irrationally in an attempt to free their students from being stuck in a mind-made life. Tea and Zen, however, are both beyond rationality and irrationality. A bowl of tea neither makes sense nor is it nonsense. It just is: completely and fully all that it is!

Though there are so many ways to convey the experience of Zen, there are a few things that all Zen traditions share in common, including our own. A good place to start is with the one who brought Zen to China, Bodhidharma, and his teachings, which form the basis of all Zen thought. He taught that Zen is:

- *A special transmission outside scripture*
- *Without any dependence on words*
- *Directly pointing to the heart*
- *Insight into one’s true nature*

They say that Zen began when the Buddha was teaching at Vulture Peak. His students waited for his sermon to begin, only to find that at the very end he did nothing but hold up a flower and depart. One monk in the audience, named Mahakasyapa, understood the Buddha’s teaching and smiled in enlightenment. Something was transmitted between them—some unseen and unheard spark passed from teacher to student. Many of you know that spark firsthand. It is still alive and burning today. After Mahakasyapa, twenty-seven such fires were ignited from master to student until the twenty-eighth patriarch received transmission: Bodhidharma, which means ‘knower of the way’, who traveled to China to spread this tradition there. A more religious Buddhism was already prevalent in China at the time, supported by the emperor, but he wasn’t there to promote religion. His teaching, the four principals listed above, became known as ‘The Doctrine of the Buddha Heart’ and were aimed at an enlightenment experience. Bodhidharma relied on direct transmission outside of any doctrine, dogma or scripture: confirmation in the eyes of a master who has already achieved such a state of mind.

Bodhidharma couldn’t find a worthy student at first, as his teaching was focused so much on meditation and being, rather than rites and rituals, beliefs and dogmas, which is why it was called “Chan” after the Sanskrit “Dhyana” that means “meditation.” Eventually Bodhidharma did pass on the torch to his student Hu-ike who in turn found a small group of students, but it wasn’t until the sixth patriarch after Bodhidharma, Hui Neng, that Chan became a popular school in China. When the Japanese came to receive Chan, they mostly learned it from the southern schools who pronounced it “Tsan”, which they translated to “Zen”.

Though Zen does not rely on any words, it can and does use words to point the way. It also uses art and even tea. Not needing words means we are free to come and go through any words we want, express ourselves in any way, so long as it is true, natural and direct. Relying on words means living in concepts, which is not living at all. So many people are living a conceptual, virtual life. They have ideas and concepts about who they are

without really knowing themselves. In awakening, we find that our concepts of things aren't the things as they are.

Zen teachings, in whatever form, should point inwards. Our answers must be experiential to be transformative. It isn't enough to just see the finger; you must also find the moon to which it points. It leads us to our true nature.

You can see how and why it has been said for so many hundreds of years that 'Tea and Zen are One Flavor'. Tea satisfies all of the four aspects of Bodhidharma's teaching in such a simple and profound way. In fact, one of the origin legends of tea is based on Bodhidharma. The scrolls say that he was in the middle of his nine year meditation, having withdrawn because he found no student ready to listen to his message. Midway, he became drowsy and started to doze off. As legend has it, the great lion of a teacher roared and tore off his eyelids, tossing them aside. And it was where those magic eyelids landed that the first tea tree sprouted!

When the Japanese came to China to learn about Zen they also brought back tea, teaware and even tea seeds to plant in Japan. When asked why they had brought this plant, they said that the Chinese masters had told them that if they wanted Zen to flourish in Japan tea would have to be planted there as well, since they are 'one flavor'. The first people to domesticate tea

were likely monks and as a result every tea mountain in China is home to a Zen monastery. And whether tea grew wild there or they chose the location to plant tea, its spirit traveled wherever Zen went. They grew up together.

You can use tea to cultivate your own Zen, your own meditation. Beyond that, tea is amazing because it can also be used to communicate whatever you have cultivated to others, and do so non-verbally. Our lineage can truly be a special transmission outside any dogma or scripture; and we don't rely on words, but rather the sutras written by Nature in these leaves. Also, tea can and does point directly inward, to the heart space. Finally, tea will show us our own true Buddha-nature—if we but follow Her inward. And then we may share some of the insights that this journey extracts from the Leaf, from Zen, from us...

