



MY RUSSIAN ADVENTURE

Article by Wu De

There is a hardness to Russia, but it is also vast and deep, ancient and mysterious. And when you tell a Russian how gloriously enigmatic they are, there's often a twinkle in their eye that suggests they too are bewildered by it all—or is that just another piece of the charming puzzle? It's easy to get lost there, and not just in space. When you think you have understood a facet looking in, the whole thing swirls into the sun and prismatic showers wash everything in rainbow confusion again. Some of the best surprises are when you think you have come upon a hard place only to find softness and warmth. Though challenging, I find Russia to be very sensitive, deep and defiant of whatever categories or stereotypes I bring with me on the long flights there. That also makes it really hard to write about. It's easy to see the obvious: that it's cold and life is tough—but then I stop and remember that some of the deepest, most loving and loyal friendships of my entire life are Russian; and it didn't always take long to get to the point where we loved one another, and language/culture barriers don't seem to matter either. In fact, I'd rank the opening of a Russian heart amongst the most beautiful things I've experienced in this life; and, in the end, I'd be dialing a lot of Russian numbers if I needed some real friends to count on...

The awakening is always a surprise, so it always comes from without. And Russia is ripe with surprises: ordinary run-of-the-mill ones, like when you think that Moscow is going to be a mean, dirty, gray city and instead find that it is colorful, rich, extremely clean and green (at least in the summer) and beautiful (for a big city); and deeper, more personal surprises, like learning about how it is possible to meet obstacles bravely with grace. Russians shrug off inconvenience, hardship or unwanted obstacles with a levity rarely seen in all my travels. "We'll have to pay extra money," Max translates with a smile. And then when he curses our luck with a "Shucks!" the smile is still there, and as with any trouble we've encountered on the trip (and what trip doesn't have troubles?) the expletive seems feigned, like he's not really affected at all. I always learn to trust more deeply in the flow watching how skillfully Russians handle unwanted situations. Their shrugs and smiles almost seem to say, 'You think *this* is bad? What about the blizzard of '04!?' (Though who can say for sure what any of their gestures really mean?) Accepting what is—that's a powerful reminder, and a more valuable souvenir than the gorgeous lacquered box I was gifted!

I've never taught so much, worked so hard or for such a worthwhile cause as these recent three weeks in Russia: we did tons of events! I literally went from the plane to a workshop, and then from a workshop to the plane on the last day. But I am not complaining. Quite the opposite: it gives me purpose, confirmation of my life's Dao and also led to so many insights for me, many of which are just now starting to blossom. What's more, I got to celebrate some great friends and make some new ones as well. I even taught some Russians a thing or two about hugging (garnished, of course, by the spirit of my guru: Swami Bhagavan Gwendt-ji).

Almost all the workshops were themed around an introduction to Cha Dao. In Russia, many people already have a bit of a relationship with Tea, which is different from other places I teach. Still, I felt like the first trip there demonstrated to me that in many cases the foundation was weak, and without a strong foundation we can't build upwards—every floor rests on the one beneath it. Not everyone is so fortunate to start his or her tea journey from the ground up. I wasn't. I came to tea through the sensual pleasure of it, and it was many years before I had a meaningful, spiritual relationship with this plant medicine. I suppose it is like the way couples are often first attracted to one another based on appearance, sexual compatibility. If their relationship stays on that level, though, it will be a shallow one indeed, and probably won't last either. Having a teacher means that we can start from and/or return to the foundation of tea, which is the thousands of years of tea used as plant medicine before it was ever bought or sold, or drunk in the spirit of pleasure. This is not to deny the pleasure—a man and woman in love can still enjoy each other's bodies—but that isn't primary. Furthermore, the touch should come out of the love, not lead into it. The Goddess wants you to love Her first, then touch Her out of that respect and love, not grope for your love through Her. And loving Her means getting to know Her first.

To get to know Tea, you have to get to know *Her*, not *about* Her. If She is to be a living presence in your life, then you must respect Her as such, and communicate with Her—relate to Her—not view Her as stuff. Our ancestors never put "stuff" or "chemicals" into their bodies. They consumed *life*! In many Native American languages the verb for a kill on the hunt was 'to give-away', so a brave would return home and tell his wife, "a deer gave-away to me today." But gave away what? It's life, of course. We consume life, not stuff (call it energy if you will). It comes from Nature; it comes from the sun, water, wind



and weather. And viewing your food as medicine, and as *living energy*, will open up many healthy doors for you! Tea is also alive, and as a living being I can't get to know Her by reading books about China, or the local region a tea comes from, or even tea processing. That is like me reading a book on U.S. history in order to get to know my new American friend; or assuming that a book on human sexuality, pregnancy, birth and infancy would help me get to know him either. Absurd! No book or information will help me get to know a living spirit. To do that, I have to show up and meet them—look in Her eyes and communicate. What else would 'getting to know somebody' mean? And we are all here, in Russian workshops or here in this global hut, because we wish to get to know Tea better. The awesome news is that She'll introduce you to Nature as well, both Hers and yours...

Anyway, I felt the need to confront some of the more "geeky" tea that showed up at the workshops (before proceeding into the geekiness, of course). I feel like a Chajin can geek out on tea and teaware all you like as long as you keep the spiritual bond with Tea primary. Plant medicine first. Whatever second. I enjoy a teapot book as much as any of you, just as I don't mind talking with Joyce about her new earrings. But that isn't primary for me, and when it comes down to it, I only feel like I can have such a conversation with Joyce because our love is already established, and I am certain she knows it as well as I do. Otherwise, you better believe we'd be talking about that instead!

So there was plenty of tea stuff to geek out about, though not enough for some (like Ivan the Incredible).

Russia was amazing, and I hope some of the photos scattered throughout this issue testify to that. Every workshop ended in sincere, heart-felt hugs and some seeds were planted. Some of the sprouts I planted were watered and grew up, and some had even been propagated and supported by students before I even arrived! I am sure that weekly tea gatherings are right now happening in Novosibirsk, Tomsk and Moscow for sure (*Right!?*).

Deep and heartfelt bows to all my tea brothers and sisters up North, for all your amazing hospitality and for all I learned. A few of you taught me much more than I could have possibly given to you. I feel indebted. And I hope that all of you get the chance to visit Russia one day—meet its mystery and magic, and have tea with some of your brothers and sisters there, all of whom would be happy to host you!

