



SERVING TEA IN ENGLAND

Article by Nick Dilks

As I got off the train and wheeled my huge trolley of teaware along the concrete pavement at Manchester train station, I was suddenly back in the bustling energy of this vibrant Northern city. I had left here four years ago for my Asian adventure after thirteen years of living and working at the largest Buddhist center in Europe. For those of you who haven't visited, Manchester is an uber-cool mixture of gritty northern English history, football madness and avant-garde, stylish culture. It is a thriving place. Strangely enough, the catalyst for this was an IRA bombing in the late 90s, the year before I arrived, which blew out the windows of our newly-built Buddhist center! After this, the inner city was rebuilt and the renaissance began.

I felt a pang of nervousness at the prospect of returning to my old spiritual home, as the trolley jolted on the rather inconvenient cobbles of the backstreets. I had left all those years ago feeling that I had come to the end of my connection there. My heart had moved on. I felt restricted in the role of an ordained priest, and yearned to be free of all the (perceived) constraints of the Sangha's group mentality. I did not want to leave forever, but I had to get away. I was going through the motions, doing what I was supposed to do, and I could do this no longer. If I came back, it would be to practice and share Buddhism from inspiration and love, or I would not come back at all.

As I opened the door, the peaceful vibrancy of the incense-filled reception hall was wonderfully familiar, and an old friend greeted me with a big smile. Within minutes, I had met many old buddies. It was good to see them again. There seemed to be no judgment in their eyes about my vanishing act, just friendliness and delight at my return. I soon relaxed; it was good to be back. It had been a last minute decision to return to England, so I had not given the center much notice. They had sent out a general email to people about the tea session I was going to give later that afternoon. I wasn't expecting many people to come, maybe about eight at most, but I was in for a shock!

By the way, if any of you are thinking of putting on a tea day, I would recommend leaving twice as long as expected for the set up. I had left myself two hours, and I finished with five minutes to spare. Things like extension cables can be very difficult to find in new places! Two kettles and heaters, tea cloth, tea boat, teapot mat, scoop and stick, tea lid rest, bowls, ornaments, fifteen liters of supermarket spring water, music and tea. *Pheew!*

I had brought ten bowls thinking that would be more than enough. My plan was to have an introduction explaining what I was up to in Taiwan at the Tea Sage Hut, and

then to introduce bowl tea with some Sun Moon Lake Red in the bowl. I would allow a few questions and then slowly guide things into silence with a bit of choice music in the background to make things easier for any nervous people. Then I would brew some tea from the side-handle pot, talk about this style for a while, a little more silence, and then space for some questions at the end. The whole thing would last three hours. I would then finish by giving the bowls away along with some awesome tea to drink at home.

Within ten minutes there were ten eager faces opposite me and more people waiting outside! I even had to go upstairs to get my favorite extra bowl. There was a real mixture of people from all over the world: Estonia, India, France, Australia and South America. Once again Tea's universal appeal was apparent. Only about half were from the Buddhist center, and others had heard somehow and walked in off the street. It was fun to share what little I 'know' about tea with others, and it made me appreciate how much I had learned through being around Wu De and the others at the tea center these past few months. Anecdotes and stories flowed from my mouth in a way that surprised me, though I was also very careful to explain how inexperienced I am. This actually seemed to put people more at ease, so I must remember to be humble more than once a year. It seems to have a good effect on people!

What really impressed me was how earnestly some people wanted to learn about tea beyond the infamous tea bag. As most of you know, tea occupies a very central place in British culture. From colonial 'high' tea at 4pm at the Ritz to 'builders' tea sloshing over the tabloids on construction sites during *tea* breaks across the land. Tea is everywhere still. Tea with TV, tea with a 'fag' (which is a cigarette in England rather than the American meaning). The morning brew to wake up; the evening brew to wind down. "By heck! I could do with a brew," is a phrase you often hear from passersby. Even though coffee has lured away some poor souls, most British people still enjoy tea throughout the day after their morning treacle (dark coffee). But, the overwhelming majority (96% according to the UK Tea Council) drinks from tea bags. And about 98% take it with milk; 30% add sugar. Hardly anyone, as far as I could observe, drinks organic tea from old trees in the more meditative style I have become accustomed to. What I could see in front of me, though, was a bunch of people who wanted to find out what tea had to offer beyond milky bag tea. For instance, they seemed really interested to hear how much power ancient trees still have in their leaves; how plantation tea is processed and weakened on the way to the tea bag; how pesticides and other chemicals seep into tea trees and damage them, the world and us too. They were really keen



Super Cha Tongs!

to try the tea that I had brought and everyone agreed that it had a very different energy to the tea they were used to. People were also interested in the spiritual, mythical side of tea: How the monks of old would harvest their own tea and drink it from the same bowls they used for lunch; how tea has been used as a medicine and an aid to meditation for thousands of years; how Zen Masters admonish their heady students to 'Have a cup of tea!' And how Zen and tea are 'one flavor'.

It was really heartening to have such an appreciative crowd, and to see that many shared my own inexplicable desire to integrate tea into their journey. Soon the noise of people outside became quite loud and an old friend popped his head through the door and said, "*Prabhasvara* (my Buddhist name), there are about ten people out here waiting!" I hadn't even had time to go into silence with the first group, but I asked them if they wouldn't mind swapping. We had been about an hour. I gave them some tea (but not the bowls!), swapped emails with some, and then another ten awesome people came in. I had only had time to sprinkle some leaves in the bowls before another friend came in and said, '*Prabhasvara*, there are loads of people waiting next door!'

So things did not quite work out how I imagined, but thirty people got at least an hour each trying some great tea and talking about the many things a more conscious

approach to tea has to offer. The response was great news for me, and I hope great news for our tradition too. I have been feeling more and more inspired recently to start something over in England when the time feels right, and I know Wu De would like to have another center in the U.K. From this first dipping of my tea into the waters of England, it certainly seems like there could be a very strong interest from the post-colonial Brits should anyone decide to bring the treasures of our tradition to those lands.

On a personal level, it was great to reconnect with my old Buddhist center through tea. When I left years ago, I was fed up with all of the 'headiness' around the center, the rights and rituals, the study, the rules. How awesome to just drink tea. Serving tea is probably the most useful Dharma teaching I've ever had the privilege to share with people!

