



ESTONIA AND UKRAINE

Article by Wudoffsky

There is an old Chinese saying that through Tea we make friends, and it is something every tea lover can attest to: that Chajin (tea people) are some of the best people around. I have made so many great tea friends over the years, and many I would even call brothers/sisters, though I never dreamed of so many dear friends and so far apart. I have traveled a tremendous amount this year, wearied by flights and countless seminars but uplifted by all the smiles and heart-opening tea sessions. As my life harmonizes with my Dao, I find myself floating on Grace, and open to adventures again like when I was younger. I'm still not so interested in the tourism of the places I visit; it's the Tea that inspires me! I find immediate kinship with tea brothers and sisters, no matter how wide the cultural or linguistic gap. Tea people are always hospitable, always cook great food and always give out loving hugs.

This trip furthered my belief in the medicinal power of tea to transcend differences and teach in a way that everyone can incorporate into their lives. No matter what tradition a person comes from, they find tea wisdom to be their own. I always say that while all the other traditions are oracled by people, and therefore culturally, linguistically and temporally specific, these sutras are instead written in the veins of a leaf. They are written by Nature. And they are nonverbal, which means they transcend boundaries. You could say you don't want a bowl of tea I offer you, but it would be absurd to say you don't agree with it or don't believe in it. When we teach in words, people can disagree. They can say they don't believe in the concepts we are suggesting. But Tea says everything in a deeper way, and you can translate it into any language, any tradition or value system. If you put a Buddhist, Christian and Hindu in a room and they discuss religion or their respective worldviews, they will argue. But if they go into that same room and drink tea, they will emerge brothers and sisters. I have seen it, again and again.

This trip I did a very special event with a brother named Un Ryuu from Ukraine. He studied Shakuhachi in Japan for some years and our Ukrainian hosts arranged for a night of tea and flute. We drank a beautiful Five Element tea boiled and served in bowls, while Un Ryuu stunned us with visions of bamboo, flowing water and valleys rolled up in mist. Everyone was very present, awake and at ease—tranquility flourished like the growing notes that sprouted from his stunning bamboo flutes. For around ninety minutes the only sound was the clinking of bowls, the satisfied slurping of meditating minds and the transcendent flute, which reminded us all to not

drift too far away by occasionally rising in pitch the way a strong breeze would remind a still grove of bamboo. At the end, after so much silence, I was asked to speak briefly. It seemed everything I could say would intrude, so I said just that: I expressed how grateful I am that Tea is my vehicle of self-cultivation as well as my means of expressing my Zen. Un Ryuu and I really have it made, because we can express our Zen in a nonverbal way, which allows us the luxury of avoiding any arguments or disagreements. The Tea is just there, present, as is the music. You can't argue with it or refuse to believe in it. It just is what it is. Of course, I speak in my seminars, but I make a strong effort to use a universal, secular language that—as much as possible—is in concordance with the universality of Tea. I haven't so far met anyone who disagrees, especially since I repeat so often that the answers are in the Tea; that all my wisdom came from brewing Tea; and that I am only translating Her message to the best of my ability.

They say that Zen began after the rainy season when all the monks were assembled at Vulture's Peak for a discourse. The Buddha never said a single word. He only raised a single lotus in his enlightened hand, a legendary twinkle in his eye. And there was one student who heard that magnificent teaching: a slight grin and a flash to equal the Buddha's streaked across the eye of Mahakasyapa. From him this great enlightenment was passed down from teacher to student until the twenty-seventh master, Bodhidharma, brought it to China where it was to prosper, spreading and growing in Korea and Japan later. Bodhidharma clarified the four foundations of Zen: 1) direct, nonverbal transmission from teacher to student; 2) no doctrine, no dogma or reliance on scripture; 3) Zen must lead into the heart of a human; 4) Zen must reveal the Truth of Reality and Nature. Because of the first two aspects of Zen, it has always relied heavily on the arts to convey itself, most especially Tea. While Zen can be transmitted in 'Zen Buddhism' it is sometimes inhibited by it as well. Actually, the word 'Buddhism' was first used in 1805, and by a British author. The Buddha didn't teach Buddhism, and the idea of distinct religions was foreign to Chinese and Japanese who had, and often still see no problem in having Buddhist monks over for a funeral, praying for wealth at a Daoist temple and visiting a church on Sundays. For that reason, archery, calligraphy or Tea often say more about Zen than a lecture on Zen Buddhism every could.

There were a total of twenty-three events in Estonia and Ukraine, and all in seventeen days. Over the last few years, and lots of experience, our events have



Your Estonian tea sister: The amazing, magical and gorgeous Triin!

distilled into four varieties: The first are what we call ‘tea ceremonies’ or sometimes ‘tastings’. These are usually around two hours. There will be a period of silence with bowl tea followed by a small lecture. If there are a lot of people we boil tea; otherwise we put leaves in the bowl or use a side-handle pot. Ideally, I like these to be eighty minutes of silence followed by a forty-minute lecture, but I adjust based on the audience and their relationship to the Tea/Silence. The second and third kind of events we do are half-day and full-day workshops, sometimes called ‘seminars’. In these, I try to provide a balance of what I call ‘Heaven’ and ‘Earth’, meaning I focus on the practical aspects of tea, like how to brew or how to hold the bowl, while also discussing how to use tea as a means of self-cultivation and to shift one’s lifestyle starting that day. I hope that people who come will either begin a spiritual practice through tea, or deepen whatever practice they already have. Finally, we sometimes have parties—

usually with boiled tea and food in a social space and then a silent, sacred space outside or in another room where people come and sit for three bowls. In that way, people shift from a sacred experience to a party, creating a more conscious kind of social interaction. These usually end in a lecture, as well.

This trip we did nine tea ceremonies, including the most beautiful one with the flute, and eight workshops. The ceremonies were all packed, and some even had thirty people, so I made a lot of boiled tea (often Five Element tea based on Shou Puerh). The seminars also went really well, and we shared a lot. One of them was for older students and was designed to delve deeper into gongfu tea. Everyone had a chance to brew, and Ivan was thrilled and tickled—giggling his way to Heaven at the chance to be around so many gongfu tea discussions!

Estonia & Ukraine

In Estonia, the tea community has deepened and grown since my first visit last year, and I was happy to see so many of my soul family there. Siim, Timo and the stunning Triin, who work with Steve at Chado, did an amazing job organizing everything (the food was awesome). It was inspiring to see a deepening in their tea practice, improvement in their brewing and understanding of tea as well as a stronger commitment to serve more tea after I left (poke!).

This year, I have to admit that I have cried a few times, and find myself moist-eyed as I type these words, as I see one of my lifelong goals coming true. I seem to have been called to teach more in Russia, Estonia and LA—for whatever karmic reason—and I have always hoped that these communities would connect more. This year, I saw the seeds for that planted. Of course, I am so proud and brag about all of you to each other, so the three communities know all about each other. It is the honest truth that I only ever accept any compliments about my teaching because of how amazing my students are. That isn't false modesty: there are so many of you that are worth three of me + a pot of old Puerh! So, everyone had heard about everyone else. (For example, the female Russians have a big crush on the great Alec Breedges and the male Estonians seem endeared to Skylar.) With a joy and pride brimming my soul, I saw this year many of the Russians come to Estonia and meet the people there, and the man behind everything in Estonia, Steve, also visited LA this year and met all the wonderful tea brothers and sisters there. I hope to see more of this in the coming years, including large annual gatherings at our new center once it is built!

As it turns out, while I was in Estonia, there was a nice tea event happening in LA, and the pictures just helped confirm these sentiments. Everyday, I feel more and more like this is *our* vision, not Wu De's.

The turnout in the Ukraine was also amazing, and I met many new friends. Dasha and her husband Teras were great translators. I was worried because it was the first time I had ever taught to Russian-speaking people without my beloved Maximushka there to translate for me. They did an amazing job, though. Dasha also speaks Chinese with an incredible fluency, maybe better than some Chinese people even. Teaching through a translator is always an awesome experience because you have to slow down, and you can breathe and be more present to the people as they receive the message. Usually, one is talking at the same time as the audience is receiving, but such pauses allow me to focus on how they are absorbing the message. And you can tell a lot about the quality of the translation by watching the listeners to see how they are receiving the teaching. When you have given a teaching many times, you know how people usually receive it. Amazingly, I usually find that Russians receive things more deeply. The Ukrainians were like that too.

I had a small break on a Sunday morning in Kiev and Steve suggested we go to see an old church. The people there were in the middle of an Eastern Orthodox mass, and it was one of the most stunning experiences of my life. I find Greek Orthodox a bit more mystical than Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodox even more than Greek (I am no expert, though). There was a full choir and a huge two-story Mary painted on the wall, gilded in gold. I was moved to deep silence, and hand on heart I cried, saying some prayers for some of you specifically.

Seeing Ivan, Dennis and Katya in Estonia and Ukraine was a treat. Steve, Ivan and I had a ton of laughs, joking on and on into the night, even though we were exhausted from the day's event. Ivan and Steve both have wonderful senses of humor, and our Ukrainian host Sato was hospitable enough to join in the hijinks. (If you see Ivan, ask him to share a *bowl* of tea with you and tell you about what a "Puerh Gopnick" is.)

As awesome as this trip was, it was also great to return home, knowing that I have *five months* at the center. I have two books to work on, and so many lovely visitors on the way (hopefully more)! It is a dream I have strayed into: imagining how I could devote my life to tea and do so without getting involved in any of the business side of selling tea or teaware. I believe deeply in the need for free tea centers, starting here in Taiwan but hopefully soon elsewhere too. I also believe that the medicine of Tea can help awaken this world, connecting us to Nature, ourselves and each other. I always say that everything I teach can be distilled in six words, and if you understand these words you won't have to wait for me to return or come to you and have a workshop. They say everything:

Earth
Sky
Spirit
Plant
Medicine
Tea



