



TEA AS ART: PART II

Article by Lindsey Goodwin

In last month's newsletter, I discussed ways in which the process of making art and the process of serving Tea are one and the same. This month, I'd like to shift my focus somewhat to address how the process of creation can elevate the act of serving Tea from the aesthetic and conceptual domains into the spiritual realm.

While art and the spiritual have long overlapped, becoming one, becoming two, merging and splitting again and again over the millennia since the earliest of cave paintings and carvings, this is a time in which mainstream societies typically view art and spirituality as two separate arenas. However, art still remains one of the primary ways in which people connect to the Divine, and through Tea and a variety of other media, there is a strong potential to reunite the spiritual and the artistic.

This reunification holds the potential for enormous societal and spiritual growth around the world. This is especially true now, when codified religions benefit people and societies less and less, and an increasing number of people are seeking a more personal (and, non-dualistically, a more universal) approach to the Divine. Today, more than ever, spiritual art has the power to shift our focus from the transient, material and conceptual worlds to the Source, to infinite love and to ultimate reality through mystical experiences and transformative works. Tea as art is no exception, and as an interactive, time-based medium it holds extraordinary potential for initiating powerful shifts in consciousness.

From my current perspective, I believe that there are three main methods in which Tea servers (and artists of all kinds, for that matter) can elevate their art into the spiritual realm. The first is setting intention. The second is self-cultivation. And the third is effectively transmitting the inherent wisdom and love of Tea, of Life and of the Divine.

One note before I proceed: Although I have written this article with Tea as the focus, these words are not meant to exclude, and for the most part they can be applied to everything from painting and calligraphy to dance and music. Whatever your art forms may be, it is my wish that these words help you along your path toward realizing your artistic visions, as well as toward a personal and universal healing through art.

Intention

As with any spiritual practice, setting an altruistic intention in serving Tea leads to advancement, while the presence of a selfish intention or the absence of any clear intention leads to less inspired and inspiring results.

Self-serving intentions cannot lead to enlightenment and cannot result in the highest of art forms, nor can they result in transcendent Tea sessions. If your intention is to impress others, earn money or otherwise work on an egoic level, then your practice will automatically be stunted. You could think of this as instant karma, or as the drying up of a carelessly used spring, but no matter how you think of it (or avoid thinking of it!) the result is the same—there is unavoidable diminishment in the quality and growth of your practice as the creative spirit which once nourished you withers away into dust. In popular culture, there have been many examples of artists (musicians in particular) who have experienced this kind of loss of creativity, and it often ends in tragic results. With Tea, the pressure to serve Tea extraordinarily well (or in a way that is appealing to the masses) is not as high as it is in certain other art forms, so results may be less extreme for Tea people who lose their way. Still, the impact is there, and it is a small tragedy for all those who remain untouched by the spirit of Tea as a result.

A lack of intention creates its own limitations in the creative process of serving Tea. If you do not know why you serve Tea, then how will you know the best ways in which to serve Tea? Basic questions, such as which teaware to use and which teas to select, become difficult to answer, and are too often answered based on flimsy reasoning or emotional attachments rather than on deep truth and wisdom. This is the kind of Tea serving that lacks any real drive beyond the superficial, and which stifles genuine improvement in skill and wisdom surrounding Tea. To me, this is the sadder of the two unskillful approaches to intention in one's practice, as it echoes the Socratic message that "an unexamined life is not worth living." When drinking Tea as a mere beverage in this way, most of what could be recognized in Her (the wisdom, the deeper beauty, etc.) is lost... poured down the drain, so to speak.

Setting a clear intention in serving Tea can elevate your tea sessions tremendously. For some, this could be an intention that spans all sessions and all Life, such as the Buddhist intention to work for the happiness, peace and liberation of all beings. Or it could mean more specific intentions for each unique tea session, such as a bringing about of peace, connection or healing for a given group or situation. Any of these intentions guides each step of the creative process behind serving Tea and increases the



frequency of the entire session (and perhaps even the lives of its participants far beyond the session).

Regardless of your intentions, it is important that you not become attached to results during the process of serving Tea. Setting intention is not about a craving for something in particular to arise. Getting attached to specific results (especially results which require other people to change) is a doomed endeavor. Instead, setting an intention and then allowing space for whatever arises can lead to deep transformation for you and your guests, especially if you focus on charging your tea with the energy of transformation. Setting intention for a tea session is about developing an expectation of a positive and meaningful tea session without defining, limiting or otherwise preconceiving the exact forms that positivity and meaning will take. For example, you could ask the Divine to fill your tea session with peace without expecting silence, wisdom without expecting speech, or healing without expecting a specific improvement in health. Setting any one of these intentions is a catalyst for change, yet it does not involve any delusions of controlling the uncontrollable and it makes space for the universe to find the best path to beauty and truth through transformation. (I assure you that the universe is much better at this than we are!)

Cultivation

A successful work of sacred art is an adroit messenger of wisdom. The sending of this message is Transmission, which I'll address later. For now, let's talk about successful work and wisdom, and what they mean to the process of creation.

Honing your craft and cultivating wisdom both take work, and lots of it. Certainly, there is the building of technical skill, which is unique for each medium and each artist. But beyond the perfection of pouring from your Yixing pot or hitting the chords just right on your instrument of choice or getting your use of color down pat, there are certain lines between skill and wisdom which get blurry as one refines technical skill to a high degree. One of these is what artist Alex Grey calls the "difference between looking and seeing." He writes, "Seeing the subject inquires, motivates, determines every aesthetic decision and leads to a recognition of meaning." In my own experience and in stories shared with me by professors and peers in the art world, looking beyond the surface of subject matter and understanding its true essence is often borne out of a more formal analysis of the subject itself. For example, drawing an apple 500 different ways gives you unique insight into

Tea as Art

its very nature, and once you truly see it, you can then convey that essence more effectively through your art. Similarly, preparing the same kind of tea many, many times can help you to initiate a sort of dialogue with that tea, and to help Tea express Herself through you more fluently. When you no longer look at Tea as something tasty that you drink or 'something interesting' because of its longstanding cultural significance and you begin to see Her for who She is, there is a certain shift that occurs in your Tea serving, and your sessions may be profoundly changed as a result.

The transformative insights arising from this shift in perspective improve your technical skill, certainly. More important than this side effect is what they are in and of themselves. They are an enriching and proliferation of your Tea wisdom. Seeing Tea for who She is initiates a deep transformation in which Tea becomes a spiritual practice, and a bridge between the spiritual and the everyday. This change is not an on/off switch for most people, and making the shift to Tea as a spiritual practice often takes a lot of work. However, over time, there is the development of insight and of an ability to tap into universal beauty and truth through Tea. It is a process of learning to play and to draw upon the wisdom of Tea at any moment.

As the philosopher Alan Watts once said in a lecture, artists must learn to "play" (to connect with the Divine and express it fluidly) on demand, and to repeatedly contrive the "controlled accident" of allowing the universe to express itself through them. Watts emphasized the importance of self-cultivation in this process. He said, "To spread joy, you have to have it. To impart delight, you have to be, more or less, delightful [by doing things which delight you]."

As a *Chajin*, you could think of it more like this: "To spread a love of Tea, you must have a love of Tea. To transform others through Tea, you must allow Her to transform you." As you embrace the love of Tea and a personal transformation through Tea, ask yourself how you can change your own consciousness and lifestyle in order to convey the love and transformation inherent in Tea. You may be surprised where this line of questioning takes you...

Transmission

When approaching the process of serving Tea (or otherwise creating art) as an act of devotion, incredible things begin to happen. Alchemical things. Magical things, even. A large part of this is the transmission of Divine wisdom to participants (or, in the case of certain other art forms, viewers or listeners).

Wu De recently gave me some advice about this. He said, "Ask yourself what the difference is between when I make tea and when other people make it. It's different, yes, but *what* is different? How is it different?" As far as I can tell, the difference is transmission of wisdom and love. He fills his Tea sessions with love and devotion to Tea. As his Dao, this way of Being overflows into all areas of his life. As Wu De describes it, he "gets out of the way" and lets Tea

work through him. Or as Grey puts it, "The masterful artist transcends the limited sense of self and becomes an active channel of universal creative spirit." Grey adds that when experiencing work from a masterful artist (like Wu De), the "rational facilities are transcended and the ego seems to dissolve into an awe-filled timeless presence." People's eyes are opened to physical beauty. Their minds are opened to archetypal beauty. And then all that is transcended; their hearts are opened and wisdom flows in.

This act of "letting Tea flow through you" appears to be something which cannot be held onto. Like a meditative state, the tighter you try to grasp it, the more it slips through your fingers; it is a releasing into the void rather than a clinging to the material. As the inimitable Leonard Cohen writes, "Magic would not tarry. It moves from arm to arm." From what I can glean from Wu De, it is something that is practiced again and again until it can be summoned. It is about the creation of space through which the creativity and wisdom can flow unhindered. Again, Cohen, referring to Magic: "It rests in an empty palm. It spawns in an empty mind."

As Grey says, "The deeper the individual artists penetrate into their own infinitude, the more they are able to transmit that state." Wonderful, beautiful! But how do we actually achieve this? Meditation helps. So does yoga or other energy work (such as *Dao Yin*, which we practice here at Tea Sage Hut). Changes in your day-to-day life make more difference in your Tea practice than you'd guess. In your Tea serving and in your life, making every effort to merge into Love is transformative beyond compare. So is working to dwell in Being. To disappear into the eternal Now to find the Medicine of the moment. To become one with Tea, Guests and all of Life...

Ultimately, your Tea practice, your spiritual practice and your daily life get all blurred together. And this is marvelous for all three of these aspects of your life. After all, spiritual art and the art of living are often informed by the mystical experience. Serving Tea rids the artist of this false division between the mystical experience and the creative act or the daily routine—the art form, the mundane and the mystical experience are one, and the sessions are every bit as shamanistic as they are artistic and ordinary! This oneness leads to intense growth, fractal-like, strong and intensely networked in the psychic and emotional frameworks of a Tea session's host and guests. And the higher your vision of Tea as an artistic and spiritual medium, the more elevated your transmission of spiritual and aesthetic beauty becomes. Like an accomplished musician wielding a simple instrument and microphone to captivate a crowd, even the simplest of teaware and tea can take on a mystical, transformative quality when prepared with love, devotion and wisdom.



