



BAISAO PART III; OUR TRADITION

BY NICK DILKS

Amongst the microphones, visual equipment, and other necessary tangles of modern technology, Wu De and myself sat down and discussed a very different time where a few strokes of Baisao's ink brush had sufficed to communicate his love of Tea to posterity. The interview marked the culmination of a journey trying to trace the footsteps of my Japanese Tea hero, stretching from early Taiwanese summer deep into the cold season. And perhaps it is fitting that I will finish my series on Baisao while the young sheng Puerh sleeps, ready to stir again with the spring sun as it wakens the clay jars.

All along, I've said that this would be a three-part series, but in the unfolding it has expanded. This time, I thought I would let you read some of the interview itself, and then next issue I'll discuss my comments and insight into how Baisao, his life and his poems can have an influence on our lives today. Here are some of the highlights of our conversation...

Baisao's connection with our tradition:

This connection is tacit, mysterious, spiritual and one of kinship. Like us, Baisao found himself both out of time and place, and distant from those around him. So, he shed his Zen clothes and put on ancient Taoist robes that he had sewed himself, and set about making tea for strangers in a way that expressed his Zen non-verbally, though, of course, later he wrote very famous poems about this. Primarily though, what Baisao had to say isn't his story and it isn't the few hundred poems he left behind. His story is in the thousands of bowls he served at the side of the road. This is his legacy. That's what he had to say to the world. So that's what we share with him, and he's the inspiration for a lot of tea work in the world, and especially this tradition because we are also trying to awaken people to a connection with Nature, themselves, and each other by serving tea. We do so indoors, but also outdoors just as he did. And so his spirit is honored that way.

And taking tea to the marketplace is very much in the spirit of Zen. It's there in the ten ox-herding pictures. The culmination of the spiritual journey is in the return to the market place, to the people, bringing the connection back. So, the retreat is to cultivate oneself and then you must take that cultivation and bring it to the world. And Tea is a marvelous way to do that because Tea is non-verbal: it is a very direct expression of one's understanding of Zen. And for that we are incredibly indebted to Baisao,

inspired by his work, by his connection to Tea and by his connection to Zen. The way he expressed that is very important to us because we are also trying to use that non-verbal vehicle to communicate something. So ultimately what we share with Baisao is an approach. We share the same approach to Tea as plant medicine, as Nature and as a path of self-cultivation.

The connection is there because, like him, we are also outside of time, outside of our society, because we do things differently—we're outside the box. We share this with him, and we approach Tea in the same way. He appeared after many hundreds of years of not so much of that in the world. He kind of just popped up and showed up. And we have too. It's like there's been a lot of materialistic approaches to life in the world, including Tea. And the beauty with Tea is that as it diffuses into the world, its ancient heritage goes with it. There's an old Chinese saying, 'Tea brings Nature to society'. There's a kind of beauty in that. We have the same issue as Baisao. He found himself in a place where spiritual principles had degenerated and become very worldly. He found this in the Buddhist movement that he was in and he found it also in Tea. So he resurrected something ancient, he showed up differently to other people, and he had the courage to do that. And we're very much like that too. Like Baisao, we want to revive the spirit of true giving. We want Tea to return to what it truly is, which is a *leaf*, *Nature*, and one that should be shared between spirits freely, without the need for anything other than a gift. And it's one of the most important gifts: that we show up, that we hold space for someone, that we allow them to be whatever they need to be, that there's no restrictions on the space, that there's no need to conform to anything. We just create this space—this space full of presence—and it's full of loving-kindness. So, sit down and enjoy some tea with us and be anything that you need to be. We're comfortable with anything that you need to be. There's great healing power in that, and there always has been.

Dangers of mixing Tea with the coin:

Baisao wasn't selling tea. He was serving it on the roadside, and you could give him some money if you wanted to. Actually, the tradition of roadside tea served in bowls to passers-by pre-dates Baisao by a long time. Kyoto was a tourist destination at that time. It was also a thriving hub for artists, literati and scholars, and average Japanese



All are welcome for roadside tea!

people; they loved to be out in Nature. And the Japanese are fervent admirers of sakura blossoms and other flowers and trees and gardens. In particular, of course, the artists and poets and the literati were into this. So Kyoto had many parks, temples and places where people went out walking and Nature viewing, as it still does today. In Baisao's era, as you looked at beautiful sakura flowers or walked around there were some vendors boiling tea. But Baisao did things differently. He gave people a choice. Instead of charging by the bowl, and it was very cheap normally, something like a penny or a *sen*, hardly anything, Baisao took this further. He carved on a bamboo tube: "The price of this tea is anything from a *sen* to a thousand in gold, otherwise it is free. I only wish I could give it for less". Our donation box at the Tea Sage Hut says the same thing. We've carved the same thing with the same spirit of giving. And this is the true spirit of Tea.

How do you put a value on a leaf? It's a leaf from a forest. It's the second most consumed substance on the planet. In houses all over the world when you show up you get free tea, from Britain to the Middle East to China. It's always been shared between souls, and the consumerist approach to it is a very modern thing. In thousands and thousands of tea drinking years the commoditization of Tea is a very modern thing, and it can definitely get in the way. Whenever someone tries to sell you something, it definitely gets in the way. It gets between the two of you

connecting and there's a loss of trust sometimes whether it's warranted or not. Maybe you should trust this person but it's difficult because he's a salesman. Even though they are a trustworthy one, he's still a salesman, so there can be doubt between host and guest. True Tea has always been the Tea that is just shared between spirits, and it is shared freely from the heart; it's shared to welcome someone in and to connect to them, to connect to Nature. So I think Baisao just found a way. He took off the price tag and people donated tea to him and he had this donation box and that was it. He could earn just enough to eat.

*There are times sitting
idly at the open window
I reach the hidden depths
of the immortal sages,
times, rambling free,
beyond the floating world
I ascend to the heights
of the wise men of old.*

—Baisao

Baisao's confidence in the transformative power of his tea:

Baisao had a little cheeky side to him, and he liked to celebrate the transformation that his tea brought about and the fact that this was different from the average tea sold on the road. He definitely had the power to wake people up. If you asked me to describe the meditative mind in as few words as possible, I would say 'Calm and Awake'. These are also the essence of Tea. Tea makes you calm and awake, and this is why the saying that Zen and Tea are one flavor goes back over a thousand years. Zen also means meditation: the meditative mind. It comes from the Sanskrit, *dhyana*, so Tea definitely has the ability to wake people up. If the Tea is strong enough, that's all you need, the medicine is in the plant. If it's not the right tea, then more is required: the presence of the brewer, the environment, and Baisao definitely had the presence to influence the tea, to push it. His mind was there too; the mind of the brewer is in the Tea. That's one of the first insights you get when you start to make tea. You may have the same tea, teaware, and water, but a different brewer will make completely different tea.

It was one of the first Insights I had, that my master made better tea. And I would go home with the all the same equipment and it just wasn't the same, it didn't feel the same. And it wasn't just about flavor, that he knew how to brew better flavor, though that was an aspect of it. But even after I figured out how to get the flavor and the smell down, people didn't leave transformed from my tea the way they did from his. And then there were times when I saw him make tea with very average tea leaves and the effect was still transformative. There's more to it than the skill of making it taste a certain way or smell a certain way. There's the energy that flows into it from mind and the brewer's heart is in it. That's ultimately it. When it's made with presence and mindfulness and love, that's what's transmitted through the liquor. Because if we're not mindful, present and resting in loving-kindness when we are making tea, then all we're drinking is our own delusions and afflictions. And if we're resting in this space and making tea, then it will inspire others. They will feel that way, and they will turn on and drop in and show up and move to their hearts. We've seen this thousands of times; Baisao did too. It's easy to see. If you care to practice making tea for people, you'll find that it happens to yourself and then to those around you, this turning on.

On Baisao's burning his teaware, rather than they fall into 'vulgar hands':

At the end of his life, Baisao started to become famous, and he realized that his teaware would end up in museums or be passed around from rich person to rich person and hoarded. This was very prophetic. Had

his teaware not been destroyed, it definitely would be in museums, in rich people's houses, and definitely worth a fortune. He didn't save himself completely, though, because some of his students had made line drawings of all of his teaware, so after he died all of it was reproduced, and even those early reproductions are worth thousands of dollars today.

The important point that he was trying to make was that my teaware dies with me, that these are my friends, and I don't want my friends to lose their spirit. It's almost like, if you had a friend who you knew would almost die for music, and you saw that he was in danger of losing his love of music as he became successful, you might warn him, you might tell him to be careful. This is what Baisao was saying with the act of burning. He was saying that everything dies, but it's better to die in a true spirit rather than live on in some incongruent form. So it's a famous incident. He burnt all of his teaware and wrote a poem, and there's a lot of love in that. It's almost like pulling a plug on a loved one who has been suffering for a long time and has been on a machine that's keeping them alive when they really want to die. He was saying to his friends that the teaware wanted to die rather than go somewhere unpleasant, which it absolutely would have. He was absolutely correct.

What would Baisao make of the world today?

There are many ways that ancient people would look at us and find us stupid. Our disconnection from and destruction of Nature is perhaps the prime example. Our bodies are 75% water, and we can't even drink it! This issue is one of the greatest signs that we live in a sick world, that we're sick. Actually, ancient tea lovers like Baisao had the freedom to pair teas with certain waters. They divided the water into *earth water* and *heaven water*. Earth water was from springs, streams and rivers, and heaven water was snow, ice and rain. They even subdivided these into further categories. They knew the difference, for instance, between snow collected from a pine tree and snow collected from a plum tree. They could even distinguish the month it had been fetched. They had access to so many kinds of water because they could drink all of its forms. We just can't do that these days, so we have to do the best that we can and find the springs wherever possible and locate good, clean water for ourselves. That's a big part of the alchemy of Tea.

I think that Baisao would find Tea is needed more than ever now. If he were alive today, he would get busier serving more tea just as we are doing. I think, actually, that he is alive in this tradition and that his spirit lives on in us. It's our job to explain that we've allowed the sicknesses of our hearts and our minds to spread and corrupt the world that we live in. So Tea is definitely a medicine of a returning, and we can remind people that

Nature matters, that organic produce matters. Isn't it meaningful that we have such a limited selection of water versus even a hundred years ago? And that's ultimately it: you have to love Nature. If you love any aspect of life, if you love your children and you know their bodies are 75% water, how do you not love the water they drink? They *are* water, so you can't love your kids without loving water, not ultimately. So, we've just got to make people realize that truth, connect with that truth, feel that in their hearts, and Tea can make that shift happen. I've seen it so many times.

Many thanks to Wu De for the interview, which goes into much more depth than we have space for here. Please do check out the video, if you would like to hear the rest. You can find it on our YouTube channel, via the YouTube symbol on our homepage. Next month, we'll finish this series on Baisao with some of my insights into incorporating Baisao's life into our own tea practice...



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