



LEARNING FROM TEA

BY SHANE MARRS

Connection through tea is so accessible. There is this magic that happens during a tea session where superficial engagement with one another tends to fade away. Those interactions where the weather, what's for dinner and how things went at work no longer become the focus of a conversation. Gone is that old argument where we generally try to convince the other of our point of view, so that the receiving party finally defers and says, "Okay, you're right, I agree," which upon reflection, wasn't nearly as fulfilling as our ego had us believe it would be. All of those concerns can certainly wash away like dust from a cleansed tea bowl. When a bowl of warm tea sits between guest and host, parent and son, teacher and student—whomever it may be—a more uniting, relaxing, and genuine connection often arises. Tea has the ability to connect us in a *Namaste*-space (where, when I am resting in mine, and you are resting in yours, we are one). Whether that connection be with ourselves, with others or with Nature, it brings harmony, reverence, purity, and at the best of times, stillness into our shared lives. Why that is, I'm still not quite sure, and yet it most certainly is!

On a recent trip home to British Columbia, Canada, I didn't just want to catch up with friends and family, I wanted to connect with them. I wanted to address important matters and appreciate each moment with a playful awareness. I wanted to see the same old people for the very first time. I wanted, at the end of a social gathering, to reflect and feel a stronger relationship to the people who shared that space. Not at the expense of outlandish laughter or goofiness, mind you, but with such a short visit home, an enduring connection that would last until my next visit, or at least span the Pacific Ocean, was most important to establish. Of course, for me, that meant connecting through tea.

After living in Taiwan for over a year, and embracing a daily Life of Tea, I also had the opportunity to represent my tradition of Cha Dao by serving tea in ceremony. Unknown to me at the time, there were lessons to be learnt as a result of being outside of my everyday serving environment. There was something profoundly different about serving tea on my own in my home country, something that deepened my commitment to this tradition and the people I love and care about so much. I found myself back home, drinking tea daily, and casually scheduled to host a handful of tea ceremonies during my stay. Each gathering confirmed some important messages:

Each gathering is the first and last.

Though I found myself serving tea to a group of old high school friends, the tea ceremony provided us the chance to see each other for the first time, or at least in a new light. Like the cleansing of the bowls, left empty, warm and without impurities, so too we give ourselves, as human beings, the chance to be embraced anew. High school never left a good impression on anyone anyway... Gathered in a kitchen, spring *chaxi* assembled, everyone sat in silence, save some tea music, and how impressively they gave themselves to the moment, treating each bowl as the first and last.

Silence. Prolonged silence. Surely a foreign experience to this particular group of friends, though audibly without they remained, for at least five or six bowls until the first of my friends felt it appropriate to simply say, "Thank you." Raising my bowl, I agreed. Here was a group of people, with countless moments and memories shared together in the past, sharing one more in a completely different way over a bowl of tea. Everyone could feel the difference; and yet, who's really to say exactly what it was? Whatever it was, it allowed space for a new way of engaging one another—a space where I saw old friends anew, and that made us all smile.

The tea, music, *chaxi* and the gathering itself naturally ended. Without a trace of itself, that was the last time we'd ever have tea together again. Not because we'll never see each other again, and not because it's too far fetched that each of us should gather at the same time and same place in the future, but because we were all unique in that moment, as were the dishes in the sink, the blossoming city trees, and the alignment of the planets and stars. To hold on to any particular aspect of that moment together would be a disservice to the ceremony itself. Like a properly cleaned and respected tea bowl, it leaves no trace of the previous tea session and only holds space for the infinite possibilities of a new one, in a new moment.

Each gathering is a meditation.

At the Tea Sage Hut, we adopt a life based around Tea. We adapt our diet to tea, we study about tea, we drink and serve tea daily, experiment with tea, and we meditate to make better tea. What better mind is there to brew tea than a clutter-free mind? We need only look



The author serving tea for a meditation group

to our bowls, kettles and teapots to observe how a space free of impurities brews. A calm heart and still mind are necessary to brew tea, lest our tea taste of emotion and ego. How bitter!

When given the chance to serve tea to a small meditation group, I felt most at home. The meditation “preceding” the tea ceremony was actually the start of the tea ceremony. Where meditation ended and the tea ceremony began, only the discriminating mind would know. There was much less need to “manage” the silence or anchor the tea session at this ceremony. Though everyone was unfamiliar with this outer approach to tea, they all understood the inner approach. It wasn’t so much about the tea as it was where the tea drew our attention, and all leaves seemed to draw us inward.

Most of them just seemed to get it. There wasn’t much need to ask questions or elaborate on the experience. Alert and tranquil was the theme of this tea gathering. Breathing in, we could feel our bodies united with the Leaf. Breathing out, we smiled at our bodies. Breathing in, we could feel the Qi of our hearts. Breathing out, we smiled at our hearts. Breathing in, the tea was fully drunk. Breathing out, bows of gratitude were deep.

Each gathering is a letting go.

Often times, words can get in the way, leading us astray. We forget that words act as signposts, pointing beyond themselves. Through words, we can at the best of times successfully achieve communication. Through silence, however, we can court communion. There is great truth that actions or non-actions speak louder than words alone.

I found myself in such a predicament, where words (or my lack of linguistic substance) failed me in attempting to discuss with a friend the importance of water for brewing tea. There are almost too many obvious points to address because water is a seemingly simple component of the tea brewing process, and yet it is so crucial. Where it’s sourced, how it’s stored, treated, improved, heated and even how it’s poured all make significant differences to the final cup. Really good water has all the features of a fine tea: It should be smooth and silky, slightly viscous and coating; it should splash up to the upper palate, promote salivation, swallow smoothly and quench one’s thirst; it should also have a neutral Ph, an appropriate mineral content and absolutely no flavor or aroma. In our tradition we often say, “teaware before tea”, and we might also say, “tea water before tea.” The former means quality teaware should be considered before quality tea. This is because high quality teaware

can bring out the best of even a lower grade tea, whereas low quality teaware will actually undermine the quality of a fine tea. Ideally, we would have high quality teaware and tea. In the same sense, fine water will bring out the finest in tea. There's really no point in assessing or enjoying the quality of a fine tea if we don't start with quality water.

At this particular tea ceremony, at my friend's teashop, the water spoke for itself. There was no need for my water pitch, and no need for my friend to resist it. It became obvious to us both that water matters. I let go of trying to (poorly) explain the matter, and he let go of the idea that heated water is all the same. Everyone else just enjoyed the tea. What through words may have divided us, through water and leaves united us.

Each gathering is a mystery.

Simple, that a bowl of tea should sit between us; profound, that it should shift our entire awareness. That a group of eclectic strangers, misfits if you will, can sit around a table over leaves and hot water in complete silence is beyond me. What is it that draws people the world over to unite over this enigmatic liquor? Part of that mystery is something I hope never to grasp and instead always to marvel at. That all the energies of the universe from the very beginning should unfold in such a way as to bring us together over tea is nothing short of miraculous!

The Mystery arises not so much from the unanswerable questions about any given tea session, but from that space where all the questions disappear. Where do they go, and why does that happen? I remember my first tea ceremony at the center in Miaoli after becoming a student. I could have asked ten thousand questions about the tea, the water, the brewing pot, the *chaxi*, the tea jars and on and on—the questions became the pillars of my mind. After countless bowls and endless steepings, those pillars crumbled and gently gave way. What was funny wasn't that I couldn't think of a question when finally prompted, but that I couldn't think of a question that even mattered, as if nothing really mattered at all. Far from nihilism, I stood by the fact that I had no meaningful questions and just wanted to drink some more tea.

At one point in my final tea gathering, well into the ceremony, I asked if anyone had any questions. The group was speechless, they didn't even say no. Which was great, because that meant it was time to drink more tea and carry on in silent connection. Seated in yet another teashop, drinking warm shou puerh on a cold Canadian eve, everyone lapsed into the Mystery that drew them to this gathering in the first place. Where everyone was from and what they did wasn't of any concern. Nor where they were going after or what their favorite tea was. None of it had to be addressed, and yet everything seemed strangely complete.

Each gathering is perfect.

Returning to Taiwan and reflecting on all of these ceremonies and servings, I also realized that each gathering over tea is perfect. Once you sit down at the tea table, all is as it should be. Sit down and practice surrender. Nothing needs to be changed and no fuel given to the idea that it can be better than it is. It is just as it has to be. It won't be like the last, nor should it be. The perfect tea ceremony is relative. In fact, it is the imperfective tea ceremony that lends itself to mastery, still leaving room for improvement and growth, and thus being alive. It is human to never reach perfection, and yet always strive for it. As long as connection is achieved and each sip embraced, one can't ask for anything more. The perfect tea ceremony isn't without imperfections, but being poised towards them, and moreover, being fully present onto what's at hand: a bowl of tea.



“It is called a tea ceremony, not tea drinking. It is not a tea shop or a tea stall, it is a temple: here, ceremonies happen. This is only symbolic. In the whole of life, around the clock, you have to remember that wherever you are it is a holy land and whatever you are doing it is divine.”

—Osho

