



BAISAO PART IV; MY TEA JOURNEY

BY NICK DILKS

This month, our pilgrimage with tea hero, Baisao, comes to an end, at least in the written form. The echoes of his life, the reflections and insights from reading his biography, and from Wu De's interview last issue, will continue to reverberate inside me for months and years to come. One of the main *koans* I have been aware of during this process is how to integrate the spirit of Baisao into these crazy times in which we live. And, of course, how to help pacify these crazy times through tea. I started off with many doubts that this was possible, but I am more optimistic that it can be done, indeed is being done within our tradition right now.

Of course, it is easy to idealize Baisao, to forget his early doubts about his path, or occasions where he nearly starved, or the excruciating back pain he suffered in old age, and sometimes the loneliness, too. Life was a lot less comfortable back then. There was no welfare to cushion people in old age or times of misfortune. Things could be tough, particularly for someone who had forsaken the buffer of family life. And yet, to live in a clean world where Nature was valued and embraced, where water was clean and the air still fresh, and where nobody needed to make the distinction of "organic" food or tea! We live in strange times of disconnection that I thought would probably leave a time-travelling Baisao scratching the few tufts of hair on his head in bewilderment: disconnection from self, from other and from the Nature and Spirit around us.

However, I believe that Baisao can be an inspiration for us all—in very practical ways—as we try to be a part of the change this world needs so badly. Personally, I come away from this encounter with Baisao full of admiration for the man's integrity and congruence, the way he embodied his ideals, even at the cost of acute hardship and suffering. In this age of insipid convenience, his life is exemplary. After all, most of us are in touch, however dimly, with the Dao, but how many of us have the courage and conviction to really *live it*? Baisao clearly spent many years thinking about the world and sought to change himself, so that he could live in line with his principals whilst serving others. He acts as a challenge to us to stop following the group and become who we really are. And Tea can be the transformative medium for this. I really liked what Wu De said in the interview when I asked him about Tea and non-conformity. He replied: "Tea is a liquid. It takes the shape of whatever it's in. It flows, it changes; it's dynamic, and that's what keeps things alive. If they're not changing, they're not growing, they're not

alive any more." As the poet Rilke once said: "For staying is nowhere."

Mostly, it is our craving for security that causes stagnation, whether this is sheltering in materialism or the security of group approval. Think of all the clutter in our lives compared to the simplicity of Baisao's! We sacrifice so much of our time working to earn extra dollars to attain this so-called security when we could be out more often, like him, drinking Tea with friends in Nature. There is also so much grasping onto the possessions we acquire when we could experience much more joy sharing with others. It's difficult, of course, to break these patterns. So much of modernity compels us to consume and hoard. I liked Wu De's advice in the interview when I asked him about the potential problem of *accumulation* of tea and teaware. He reminded me that in the absolute sense you can't really own anything, and proposed that our passion for tea can be a very powerful tool for working on craving, because this passion can lead us to "put all of our cravings in one basket", so we're not wanting and iPad one minute, then clothes the next, then a new car, etc. The message is that the more our life becomes 100% tea, the easier it is to integrate our desires, and therefore keep an eye on them. Wu De also recommended sharing our tea as a way of working with craving. As he pointed out, we may accumulate at first out of greed, but the more we serve tea, the more it becomes about how this teapot or tea can help me to serve others.

Baisao thought differently about the world. He saw that following the crowd leads to unhappiness. He saw that craving after material possessions caused suffering and he drove all his desires into his tea and serving tea to others. And this transformed him; actually, the time he spent with Tea transformed him. As Wu De said: "Tea takes us on a journey into ourselves, which is where the answers are. And resting in that space is our center, that's where we achieve mastery, which is about finding the place in you that meets the Universe and acting from there, so it is the power behind what you do. The Tao is making the tea, not you."

And, if Tea transforms us, it's quite natural that we will want to share that with others. After drinking tea for years in the monastery, this is what happened to Baisao. He wanted his tea to change others as it had changed him. But to do this, we must develop ourselves. I have to say that I loved what Wu De said about how our energy goes into our tea. I'm still new to this path, so I don't fully understand this. It is a more esoteric teaching,

but I do get a glimpse of what he means: how the bowl I serve is literally an expression of who I am, the level of consciousness I am in. And I find this a real inspiration to work on myself because I don't want to be serving my "delusions and afflictions" to others. I want to be able, like Baisao, to help others to "wake forever from their worldly sleep" through Tea. Wu De mentioned that he has some calligraphy near his bed that reads, "In every step, in every breath, from the moment I wake up until the moment I sleep, I'm preparing Tea", and I have really taken this to heart.

I need to wake up if I want to make a difference. And the world really needs to wake up. This was brought home to me the other evening when I sat at a railway station and a train pulled into the opposite platform. As you would expect, I glanced along the rows of silhouettes in the dark. Then, with a bolt of shock, something struck me as strange. Everyone—all forty people—were looking down at their mobile phones or tablets and tapping the screens with their fingers! It was like an eerie hybrid of *Brave New World* meets the *The Matrix*—this plugging into the *soma* of personalized technology. Many had plugged music into their ears, too; and if that wasn't enough satiated orifices, were either eating junk food or slurping liquid fructose from Styrofoam cups. Perhaps the Wachowski brothers' vision of human batteries was not as sci-fi as I'd thought.

I'm not sure if religion is the tool to snap us out of this slumber. I'm a Buddhist, so it's not that I don't value religion. But religion tends to divide people. As Wu De said in the interview: "Tea is Nature, so it transcends boundaries. This is ultimately why Tea is one of the most important medicines in the world today. Because it transcends sectarian boundaries. It transcends all worldviews. It doesn't matter what you believe in, Tea can be an asset for you to connect to Nature, to yourself, and to other people."

I think the main realization for me that came from chatting to Wu De is that, though the world is very different now, it is more possible to resurrect the spirit of Baisao than I had initially realized. My research and study had left me with a deep yearning for times of old: pure, purling rivers; braziers soughing in unspoiled bamboo groves; and tea under the phosphorescent, one moon. I must admit that I had resigned much of Baisao's life to bygone days. Surely, there were many episodes that would not be repeated in my lifetime, where so many of us have, in the words of one modern poet, Mary Oliver, "turned from this world/ gone crazy/ for power/ for things." But I was heartened throughout my conversation with Wu De at the number of parallels between our tradition and the Old Tea Seller of Kyoto. It's true that Nature was purer back then. However, like our tradition, Baisao found himself in times which had lost contact with the tea sages, and like us he awakened to a connection with them. He also had the same approach to Tea as we do: plant medicine, Nature and a path of self-cultivation. He believed that tea

should be shared freely, so, like us, he took his tea to the marketplace and gave it away without ideas of financial gain. He also shared it non-verbally as an expression of his Zen.

The resonances we have with Baisao are much stronger than I had thought. I was, in fact, underestimating what we do as a tradition. But isn't that the job of a teacher: to point out the ideal, so that the student can glimpse its beauty for a moment? I find myself feeling much more confident now that what we offer is not so distant from Baisao, even though our times may have fallen further from the Tao. I was very touched in the interview when I asked Wu De what he thought Baisao would have made of these modern times, half-expecting him to respond that Baisao might be overwhelmed. I was surprised to hear him say: "I think Baisao would find Tea is needed more than ever now. If he were alive now, he would get more busy serving tea, just as we are doing."



*Set up shop this time
on the banks of the Kamo
customers, sitting idly
forget host and guest
they drink a cup of tea
their long sleep ends
awakened, they realize
they're the same as before.*

—**Baisao**

*I'm not Buddhist or Taoist
not a Confucianist either
I'm a brownfaced whitehaired
hard-up old man.
People think I just prowl
the streets peddling tea,
I've got the whole universe
in this tea caddy of mine.*

—**Baisao**