



THE GUARDIAN TREE

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In Jingmai, we all drank two teas in the old-growth forest. The first was under a laurel that had watched over the forest for thousands of years. The second was under an ancient tea tree. Wu De had the tea session of a lifetime that day. Beneath the Guardian Tree, he learned so much about Tea that he feels he has the material for an entire book to come. We are excited to read the new book when it comes out, which he says will bear the same title as this article and be about the environmental aspects of tea cultivation and preparation. In this article, he offers a rudimentary summary of some of these teachings and describes the experience for us.

In a lifetime there are but a few dozen days that we can say honestly change everything—every particle of every cell. These magnificently destructive days demand that things never be the same again, and we often are forced to re-evaluate all the ways we look at this world. Our habits no longer suit us and many of the stories we've told and retold up until then no longer make sense, lacking the verve they once had. With our connections to the past subdued or severed, we can experience the grief of loss and the confusion of not knowing where to go from here, only that we cannot ever return to the same. But then we remember that this is fertile soil, and new seeds will thrive here. Returning home from this year's Global Tea Hut trip was a returning home to such a slashed-and-burned field, leveled of all previous life. As uncomfortable as seeing my familiar surroundings destroyed has been, there are these hundred baby sprouts—my new children of insight.

I was literally leveled by a tea session more singularly powerful than

any I have ever experienced. And in its glorious gaze, all I thought I knew about Tea was razed. I felt hurt and lost. I dropped my bag of seeds, the contents of which fortuitously spilled all over the ground, no thanks to me. This was a saving grace, for when I returned home, I saw that many new seeds had hatched. The burned field now had the potential for stronger and more powerful trees. With such hope, my vision was restored and I could look out on a future full of new and greater tea trees covering this land. The sprouts still need watering, though.

My experiences on this year's trip were wonderful, with many lifelong memories and smiles that will fill the hallways of my life's celebrations. But the deepest one, the one that forced me to begin this writing in such a strong mythopoetic tone, happened the first day we went into the old-growth forest to drink tea in Jingmai. We had three tea sessions that day, each one so different and amazingly consecutive that they flowed

into and supported each other as a single, life-changing day. In the morning, we woke up and drank tea around an awkwardly shaped table, sharing three bowls in silence. I then gave everyone my annual speech about how meeting the old trees was very much central to our time here and that we should therefore revere these moments and not waste them in idle chit-chat or distraction (as much for my own good as for my companions' state of mind).

True to my word, I entered the forest quiet and balanced—each breath focusing my mind so that I could take more in. And there was way more than all of us combined could take in through our senses, even if we were much more sensitive—even if we came back every day for a month! There was a symphony of sound, and not the second, quiet movement, but the finale of the Ninth. The tea that was coursing through me from earlier that morning was from this forest, and it all started buzzing and chanting, joining in with the surrounding songs whether I willed it to or not.

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And as every other sense heightened, I slipped past myself, down a golden thread, through the wardrobe and into the otherworldly. The cacophony of the forest retreated from me and I found a peaceful place, where the trees lived—beyond the human understanding from mere decades of life to the experience where centuries mark time.

There are more tea trees in the forest of Jingmai than anywhere I have visited in Yunnan. They account for the great majority of all trees here. And the park is protected, completely chemical-free and thriving and thrumming with Tea juju. The trees here are happy, and so you have to get over the initial feeling that you are disturbing that century-conscious peace. I recognized my intrusion, and also that the communication I was having with the forest meant that the trees had seen us, briefly acknowledged that we were a nuisance (though a harmless one), and gone back to their meditations. We barely register in a conversation that takes from decades to millennia to complete. But, wow! So many tea trees! I can't say that enough. Astoundingly, the whole forest is tea—from ancient thousand-year-old grandfathers down to the little children that still look up to them. Tea beyond imagining, and all of it healthy! Such inspiration is heart-food and hope for environmentally conscious Chajin like us. Their roots were all spread beneath our every step, and I had the feeling that so much more was happening down there than we could ever possibly understand.

After a short, blissful walk, putting our heads on ancient trees in gratitude, we turned off the main road and head down a trail into the forest proper. After some time, we rounded a corner and there was a giant—beyond words huge—laurel tree with offering flags hanging from it. And beneath, in all their color, were some local aboriginals on their knees in prayer. The force of the scene poked me, and I realized that

there was something special here. Master Tsai whispered to me that this tree was the “Guardian Tree,” and that it had watched over this forest for centuries. He also smiled and said that we would drink tea here before this old grandfather.

There wasn't much to say. We'd all found our way into a reverie, and by this time, the group had spent around a week together, day and night, often cramped on a bus or in the one space we all shared, so the circle formed naturally. We'd also just gotten over the ego-baggage of our different trips to get here and finally started feeling like one tribe. Just the previous day, many had said that whatever they had brought with them—the trials and tribulations of their home lives—had finally been set down. Many of our conflicts getting to know each other, bumping and scraping against so many people stuck together—all of that was starting to transmute-transcend, and we were resting in one heart. When so many meditators and sensitive people travel together, we are bound to face challenges beyond the physical discomfort of travel and close proximity to so many people. There is a psychic closeness, too, and discomfort in that if you aren't used to it. But as the days passed and we worked and lived in harmony, our souls started really meaning the hugs and smiles we were sharing each day, and we started to find a place where we all could meet in our hearts that were now the group heart as well. The result of this was that tea, for the first time on that trip, came together effortlessly, arranging itself on its own.

I was so overwhelmed by the great tree and its messages, which started coming from within my core, that I blinked and we were all sitting in a huge circle before this old grandfather tree, who had sat here for millennia, its roots deeper beneath us than the crown so far above. The preparations all happened effortlessly and I looked down from the giant tree to find



myself sitting in a large circle with water on the way.

As the tea streamed into me, I melted and the whisper of the giant tree turned into a loud chanting. Everything changed. It was a moment and also not in time. I can't escape the need to share the details of what was happening on an outer linear level, along with some more poetic words that perhaps point towards much of the nonverbal, right-brain visions I was having inside, despite the fact that I know that this language will turn some people away from this account and perhaps leave some of you who weren't there wondering what I am talking about. The fact is I don't yet know. As I said at the outset, these insight-sprouts still need watering. The good news is that the outline for my next book is slowly forming, as are the teachings that will come



through me over the course of my next teaching tours. But they aren't yet solid—they are runny metaphor-colors all swirled together, like the roots of the tea forest, and like the images I am expressing here in this article. As simply as I can possibly put it, in the hopes of breaking through any confusion I've created with too much feeling in too many words, I could say it like this: *that session under that Guardian Tree changed my life and I honestly feel as if the tree transmitted some wisdom to me, hoping I would one day find the voice to express it.*

The challenge is that I myself haven't yet come to understand all of what was communicated, and so lack the clarity to share it with you. However, over the course of the week that followed, as we traveled on, some of the Guardian Tree's lessons did take shape, and I found

a unique and powerful reflection of them in the eyes of those around me. Even Master Tsai began to express some of the sentiments I was sharing, despite the fact that he didn't know that I had already expressed similar things to the group or felt them inside. Finding that the Guardian Tree had also shared some of its wisdom with others felt like a deep confirmation of my experience, but also made the responsibility of the vision weigh heavier on my heart. Translating the teachings of the Guardian Tree will occupy the next year. But before I unpack the teachings of the Guardian Tree more fully and write my next book, I thought that I could share the beginnings of them with you here—both to help me shape the tale of one of the most profound experiences of my life and also to begin the process of paying what was given

to me forward to my global tea family, for whom I do all my work and devote all my love and life. Anyway, looking back now, there really isn't much else from the trip I want to talk about.

Here are some brief summaries of what I learned that day. Mostly, these were not concepts when they happened, but feelings. There are many more layers unfolding in each tea session I have back at the Center. Voicing these feelings in words is a translation, as it were, and an incomplete one, so forgive the confusion, if there is any.

Tea & Laurel

The first profound experience on that day began the moment I turned the corner and saw the locals praying to the Guardian Tree.

And as I passed out the bowls and looked at the twenty-five others around me, it really set in. I realized that this giant tree both is and is not Tea. He is not Tea; He's a laurel tree. He's Tea's guardian. And yet, his ancient roots share the same soil, drink the same water and, judging by the length and breadth of the huge roots we could see sticking out from the ground, his roots are all tangled up in the roots of the many thousands of tea trees that surround him. They are connected, open and one, and yet also different. The Tea spirit is flowing through the Guardian Tree, as he protects them from above.

This feeling is forming in me into a literal and metaphorical representation of all us Chajin. We are guardian trees as well. We are and are not Tea. I am not a tea tree, nor a tea leaf nor its liquor. And then I drink it and become it, sharing one spirit. It is not as if I am a hollow

tube through which my tea liquor passes—it becomes me, changes me. Tea alters my perception, changes my body, spirit and mind. Tea like this shares the forest with me, bringing the forest into my body, mind and spirit in a way that is unifying.

The Guardian Tree asked me to look at the forest through his “eyes.” I was invited to see things the way he does. I saw the forest in terms of the millennia he has watched over it. I saw the connection, harmony and balance of things. I was asked to be a guardian—to join in the protective spirit of the land, ensuring that this space is forever reserved for this kind of life. These trees need to be. They play an important role in the ecosystem of the forest and the world as a whole. Preserving Tea's purity is paramount, lest all of its energy be washed into the human version of tea, as plantations on deforested, irrigated, chemical-laden lands replace old-growth forests like

this. Using cuttings to clone tea, or other plants, I realized, waters down the natural energy of the plant—distributing one spirit amongst many weaker and less nutrient-dense plants.

The Guardian Tree showed me that I am, indeed, made of Tea. I felt that quite viscerally. Like the giant tree above me, I wasn't honored with the task of protecting the “other,” but really with protecting my self. This forest preservation isn't about the survival of the jungle or Mother Earth, but about our own survival. It is about healing our suicidal tendencies. I was being asked to save myself from myself—to stop the power in us from being too destructive, which will upset the balance in a way that will cause our extinction. But what can I do to protect forests in Yunnan? How can I help? I felt the need to protect, but called out to the Guardian Tree—again from the gut and not in words—



pleading for a way to support the old tree in his duty as sentinel of this huge herd of peaceful, quiet and majestic tea trees. How do I serve?

Being a Guardian

The answer came after I had left, though the seed was planted in the session itself. The session was the answer. As I listened to others share their experiences under the Guardian Tree, drinking ancient-tree tea steeped in local spring water, I realized that the harmony I had experienced was awakening in them as well. The connection to the forest in the tea leaves was waking up their cellular memory in the same way mine had been stirred. They were realizing that they were home here, and that this place was *their* place—this forest belongs to us all because it is now forever a part of us. It is a part of our soul. And it always has

been. It was a remembering more than it was a realization.

The solution was the tea itself. We are never going to change the world with any kind of argument, no matter how convincing. There is no political, economic or philosophical solution to environmental degradation. Just as you can't stop drug use by making it illegal, we won't be able to protect Nature by making laws. Even if we convince some of the people some of the time, we won't be able to stop others from profiting from the destruction of natural spaces and resources. There really is only one solution: *they have to experience it themselves*. People have to know in their bodies that when they say "I love you" to their children, they are also expressing love to the fresh water that makes up more than half of their loved ones' bodies; that they are also loving the forest, which creates the air they breathe. They have to feel that

love. If they love the forest as they love their children—seeing and feeling that they are one—there is no need for philosophies. If the love is real and truly felt, they will naturally see the forest as their own property, and the protection of its integrity as their own health. Just as they naturally care for their own bodies and the bodies of their loved ones, treating them when they are ill, for example, so, too, will they defend the forests. The tea from these forests will awaken the Guardian Tree consciousness in those who drink it. Protecting these leaves and ensuring that they are used in this way is how we can participate. It is how we were meant to fulfill these forests.

I realized that as the Guardian Tree is the protector of this ancient Tea forest, like a fractal, the Tea forest itself is a guardian of all forests everywhere. This forest is so important because it contains the medicine that will awaken-



the protective energy that will defend all of Nature from our madness. And it will do that by helping us to remember that we are the forests and that their destruction is our own demise, as well. Seeing them as parts of our self, loving them as we do our own bodies and families, ensures their protection and vibrancy. It restores harmony through breaking up ignorance and showing us the truth of our makeup. We are plant energy: plants feed us, body, mind and soul. They are our breath, our food, our water—all that we are. We must feel this way again if we are to be healthy, as individuals and as a species. It is what already is. This is not a belief, but a fact. Our ignorance is like the clouds in the sky: the clouds block the sun, and to the ignorant it therefore feels as if the sun comes and goes—darkness and light with the passing of the clouds. But to the sun, it is always the same brightness; to the sun, the presence or absence of clouds doesn't matter. Our ideas of separation are just ideas, and dangerous ones. To the Guardian Tree, there is no separation, and whether we feel that way or not doesn't matter. From its perspective, there is only connection.

To put this more simply: *I realized that my role as a guardian tree is to protect the leaves by encouraging their medicinal use, which includes the way they are harvested, bought and sold, the proceeds of which should be used to protect aboriginal culture and Nature.* I am not talking about plantation tea. As long as we shift that to sustainable, organic agriculture, then let it be a beverage, agribusiness, and means for supporting farmers around the world. But these old-growth leaves need to be used for the good of humanity. They are like rare artworks: a Michelangelo belongs in a museum where everyone can benefit from it. These precious leaves and all the proceeds that they generate should be used to benefit people. To protect them, we must first protect those who tend them. The local aboriginals need

to be respected and cared for if we are to ask them to care for the trees. And these teas should be prepared and shared in a way that awakens the harmony inherent in them, so that they fulfill their role as medicine, designed by Mother Earth as such.

Regulating how often the trees are picked, what happens to the proceeds and how the tea leaves are prepared is a worthwhile mission. As the week passed, I was shocked to hear Master Tsai say the same things. The way we buy and sell these precious leaves will determine our attitude towards them. How and to whom we sell them will determine how they are prepared and whether or not the one consuming them will feel the connection that they should. Taking a powerful medicine that has the potential to awaken such feelings in the drinker and then giving it to someone to enjoy for the sake of some mouth pleasure is a bit like wasting one of a few precious cures for cancer on someone who doesn't have cancer just because they like the flavor of the medicine. And when that medicine can only be made in very, very limited quantities, it will have to be selectively bought and sold. The fact is, there is not currently enough old-growth tea for everyone to own.

You might ask, "Who are you, Wu, to determine who should or shouldn't have this tea?" You may feel it isn't fair that only some people get such rare tea. Of course, I don't want anything to do with determining who gets old-growth tea. That isn't my point. My point is that there is already a system in place for determining who does and does not get some, and it also is not fair. And worse, the system we have for distributing this precious resource is deflating its efficacy and ruining its very reason for existence. *Having the money to buy old-growth tea does not make you worthy of it*, in other words.

On our last day, Master Tsai said to all of us, "We aren't sitting

around drinking this old-growth tea because it is rare or worth a lot of money. We are drinking it to experience what Tea can be and how it can make us feel the love of Mother Earth, which will then change the way we treat Her." I couldn't agree more. Entrepreneurial spirit has helped create a lot of innovation and benefit for humankind, but most rational people in the world agree that there are aspects of life that are, or should be, off-limits to capitalism, like human rights, healthcare, and so on. And I would say that protection of Nature, necessary for our continued existence, ranks high on that list. The distribution of sacred tea from delicate old trees that have been a part of the cultural and religious heritage of aboriginal peoples for thousands of years should not be controlled by a market-based economy, especially one run from distant cities or foreign countries, but rather protected so that these resources benefit first the cultures that have cared for them these thousands of years, and second fulfill themselves as medicine with the potential to awaken love for Mother Earth in each steeping! And this brings us to the last aspect of the teachings of the Guardian Tree that I would like to discuss in this article: *How to be worthy of the precious tea from such forests.*

Worthiness

One of the strongest feelings I had drinking tea under the Guardian Tea was a feeling of unworthiness. This wasn't the kind of unhealthy shame we are used to avoiding in Western culture—the kind we think prevents us from living fully. In Zen, "shamelessness" and "guilt" are both amongst the ten "bondages," which may seem contradictory, but only because of translation issues. The feelings represented are subtler. Initially, we may see shame and guilt as they same, making the two "bondages"



The most important session of my life so far!

mutually exclusive. But here, being shameless is indeed an obstacle. This means we need shame, but a positive shame (not guilt, which is also a bondage). This means we have to take moral inventory of ourselves. And that is a positive activity, because the mind which is shameful is not the same mind that made the mistake for which we feel shame. Furthermore, this mind is now oriented towards a different outlook, one that transcends the mistake and/or habit that caused us to repeat it. This shame is a positive fuel that pushes us to transform ourselves. It is not guilt, which is self-defeating and holds us back.

The “unworthiness” I felt beneath the tree was not a negative emotion. It was, in fact, beyond positive or negative. It was not small and dualistic like that. It inspired me, actually. During the session, as I have said many times here, it

was all nonverbal and visceral, but afterwards, this feeling of being unworthy brought up all kinds of wonderful and self-motivating questions. I asked myself what I have done to deserve such magical tea. I then realized that the Guardian Tree was saying to me, “Now that I have given you the spirit I protect, what will you do with the energy?” He was encouraging me to share what I had learned with the world—to be active in the protection of this forest, which in turn protects all forests by helping wake people up.

The Guardian Tree was asking me to see that the privilege of money is not enough. Having the cash to come there, or even worse to buy these leaves on the Internet, was not enough. He has a mind of thousands of years. Money isn’t real to him. He has seen empires come and go. *He refuses such payment!* What would I do with the Tea once

it was inside of me? Where was that energy headed? How would I pay back the connection I had experienced? What do you give to a tree? What can you give back to the forest? When someone changes your life, how do you ever repay them? I realized that there are many, many answers to these questions which would satisfy the Guardian Tree. There are many ways to show up that will fulfill the contract. I somehow imagine the Guardian Tree’s spirit as a staunch old samurai, and earning his approval only gets you a glance and a slight bow of the head, which ordinarily may seem off-putting, but in this instance is so full of respect that it melts you and makes you feel like you really have earned your place amongst the other protector-samurai warrior-trees!

As I mentioned earlier, the Guardian Tree does not acknowledge our mind-made separation.

He doesn't have a mind like that. He is a tree. Connection is his nature. He is like the sun: the clouds of ignorance do not matter to him. This means that when we drink the tea, he is as much in us as we are in him. Is he ashamed to be us?

Buying and drinking old-growth puerh for flavor or recreation is a bit like meeting the Dalai Llama and talking about the weather. It is a waste. It isn't a sin; it isn't wrong. But it still needs to be protected against. There isn't much I can do to change the whole market surrounding old-growth tea or stop all the fortune-hunters from traveling to Yunnan from all parts of China and beyond looking to get rich from the leaves of trees they claim to love. I don't think this is a case where you need to prove yourself worthy in order to drink such tea. As I said earlier, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with choosing who does and does not get old-growth tea and why. I think that if you have the karma, you will find such tea.

“I realized that my role as a guardian tree is to protect the leaves by encouraging their medicinal use, which includes the way they are harvested, bought and sold, the proceeds of which should be used to protect aboriginal culture and Nature.”

Some people travel to Yunnan often without finding real old-growth tea. I realized that achieving worthiness comes afterwards, as it did for me that day beneath the Guardian Tree. Once I had drunk the tea and awakened, with a tear in my eye I looked up, knowing I had a debt to pay, knowing that I would earn the tea from that moment on. In India, there is an old saying that if you don't pay the teacher, the teaching won't work for you. If you don't pay the forest, the medicine won't work either.

Many of the people who went on this trip expressed the sentiment that we were “meeting” the

trees, and that they knew we were there. A few years earlier, I had the feeling that the old trees would want to help participate in building Light Meets Life, and as a result, we started our annual puerh fundraisers. The money really isn't that significant, but having the old trees' energy involved in building our future Center is very important to us. However, I questioned that after listening to the teachings of the Guardian Tree. So I asked him and the tea trees. I got the feeling that they were happy to be a part of our Center, especially if those who took the cakes home drank the tea with respect and reverence, using it in the way it is intended: *as medicine*. Furthering the serendipity of this whole amazing trip, Master Tsai later turned to me on the bus and said, “I think those trees are very happy that part of them is becoming a part of our Center. I felt their agreement.” Be sure to remember this if you decide to bring one of our 2016 cakes home!

We are all responsible for the environmental degradation of our world. We have all played our part. We are all, therefore, unworthy of such rare tea and the healing that it provides. But this is not a bad kind of shame; it is not guilt. It is positive shame. Having had the fortune to drink such tea, despite our horrendous abuse of Mother Earth, we find an undeserving forgiveness in Her and an awakening in the experience. We now have the very real opportunity to change our ways and become worthy of Her love. Drinking such a tea is a luxury that we'll have to pay for afterwards, at least for now, until different and better protective

measures are in place. And it is, in a sense, donation-based, as we pay whatever we wish for the experience. But if your experience is anything like mine, then you will want to earn the rare old-growth leaves that came to you by way of thousands of years of aboriginal care, by way of millions of years of evolution, and, most importantly, by way of Mother Earth's love for you!

The Last Bowl

Believe it or not, we had two full, long and deep sessions that day in the tea forest. (As I said, it was one of the most powerful days of my whole life.) The second was under a thousand-year-old tea tree and was very feminine, in contrast to the strong masculine power of the Guardian Tree. That session also had its wisdom and teachings, and was, ultimately, the perfect complement to the session that filled me with teachings, since it somehow emptied them. It provided space for a very overwhelming experience to gestate in. It was like a fresh shower after the field had been cleared and was pregnant with seeds. It brought the energy that would be needed to grow the seeds that will one day fill a whole book. In the meantime, I encourage you, my beloved tea family, to start contemplating what it means to be a guardian tree yourself: an ent, a Treebeard, a steward of the forest. Start with this month's bowl...



