

# RARE CEDAR ALOESWOOD

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Of the many types of incense in the world, Aloeswood is the king. And among the many varieties of Aloeswood, Rare Cedar (奇楠) is the highest quality, thought they are all produced in similar ways. There is an ancient saying: "A piece of Rare Cedar incense from Champa (a kingdom in southern Vietnam) is worth more than ten thousand pieces of gold."

After the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368 C.E.) practising the Way of Incense decreased precipitously in China. The Japanese, however, discovered a new location for Aloeswood production via trade with Southeast Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

This Aloeswood was produced in "Six Countries (六國)" and became a reliable source for a quality Aloeswood incense product. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, the reference to the "Six Countries" of Aloeswood was no longer used, but the characteristic "Five Flavors (五味)" of the six places was still used to distinguish Aloeswood.

The *Six Countries and Five Flavors* chart became the standard for evaluating Aloeswood. The incense ceremony and Buddhism spread together, reaching Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. During the Japanese Muromachi (室町) period (1333–1573 C.E.), the eighth shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa (足利義政), with the support of the mil-

itary, established schools to teach the arts of incense, tea and flower arranging. These three "Ways of Elegance" (雅道), initiated a spectacular culture of incense across in Japan. The Japanese tea ceremony is conducted with rigorously strict procedures and carefully studied etiquette. The purpose of the rigidity is to create ceremonial space, baptizing the conscience and achieving a state of refined spirit. During the Warring States period in Japan (15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries), incense studies were supported by the shoguns and samurai, who believed the ritual would bring peace and calm, as well as purification in troubled times.

At first, incense was categorized by where it was produced, but later on a new system of classification was developed at the behest of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, which evaluated the intrinsic qualities, merits and drawbacks of the different incense varieties. Nowadays, Japan has many different schools of thought in regards to the study of incense, and each school's opinions differ. The "Five Flavors" are spicy, sweet, sour, salty and bitter. They were used to metaphorically describe and categorize all the different kinds of incense, including Aloeswood. These "Five Flavors" are also important to Chinese and Japanese cosmology and Traditional Medicine, representing the elements and so on.

Nowadays, the "Five Flavors" are used to describe specific aromas, and do not refer to a specific kind of incense wood. Incense that only possesses one such aroma/flavor is called "One Established Flavor (一味立)." Aloeswood incense has an aroma that is clear, abundant and winds around for a long period of time without dissipating. It combines all five aromas/flavors, so it is called "Five Established Flavors (五味立)." Like tea, Aloeswood is a balance of all the elements. It brings together the best of what incense has to offer.

## *Six Countries & Five Flavors*

### 香 Jialuo/ Kyara (伽羅)

Refers to Aloeswood incense, which is considered the highest grade. Bitter; positive polarity; gentle fragrance; bitter as if a red-crowned crane suddenly appeared. Its elegance emerges naturally, like a person living within the imperial palace.

### 香 Luoguo/ Rakoku (羅國)

Located in Siam (Thailand). Sweet; positive polarity with a hint of white sandalwood; odorless, its aroma relies mostly on a bitter smell; descriptive analogy would be the samurai.

### 香 Zhen Nahe/ Manaka (真那賀)

From Malacca, Malay Peninsula region. Odorless; negative polarity; gentle and gorgeous fragrance that gradually becomes fainter; descriptive analogy would be a woman.

### 香 Zhen Nanman/ Manaban (真南蠻)

One theory says it came from the Malabar coast of India, another theory says it came from Cambodia and Laos long ago, and another says Thailand. Salty; negative polarity; at first smell it seems low and superficial; descriptive analogy would be the common people.

### 香 Zuo Cengluo/ Sasora (佐曾羅)

Found in eastern India. Spicy; negative polarity; the fragrance is cold and leads with sour; at first it resembles Jialuo, though gradually fading; descriptive analogy would be the monk.

### 香 Cunmen Duoluo/ Sumotara (寸門多羅)

From Sumatra, Indonesia. Sour; positive polarity; odorless and acrid; its aroma is weak and lowly; descriptive analogy would be a field worker.



In traditional Japanese incense study, the highest-grade of incense was called “*Jialuo* (伽羅),” but *Jialuo* is not exactly equal to Rare Cedar. One could say that Rare Cedar is a kind of *Jialuo*. The first line of the chart shows that *Jialuo* is high-grade incense not because of its production location, but rather because of quality, which is unique amongst the five. The traditional study of incense pays particular attention to the variation in aroma and gradation the incense releases. The enriched aroma of Rare Cedar is undoubtedly unmatched.

Rare Cedar and ordinary Aloeswood incense are difficult to distinguish by appearance alone. But, when heated, Rare Cedar is comparatively clear with a fragrance that changes over time and lasts much longer. In sum, when evaluating “color” with the naked eye, categories are subjective and not a definite standard. The amount of resin produced and whether or not the Aloeswood sinks in water (because it is heavier and more full of resin) remain the most important standards. A rich resin, like that of a good *Jialuo*, produces a complex, rich fragrance; whether or not it can sink in water is of secondary importance.

*Jialuo* has a texture that is “hard like jade” and also “soft like clay.”

In reality, the texture is both soft and hard. It certainly is not soft throughout the production process, and some old Rare Cedar incense resin will crystallize when it has been underground for a very long time. Resin that originally was soft will harden under those conditions, but its aroma can still be coaxed out with a bit of heat. Rare Cedar has resin that is as soft as paste. If a bit is pinched off, it will leave a scar. It rolls up when pared out of the

wood with a knife. When kneaded, it will become a pellet, and will leave the tongue tingling when tasted. Gentle heating will coax forth a complex aroma that awakens the spirit upon cooling. As time passes, the fragrance will change, its gradations will release and the twisting, changing, rich aromas will last for a long time. The beautiful fragrance will fill the nasal cavity all day long, changing the way you experience the world.

### *The Four Features of Rare Cedar*

☞ Rare Cedar has a fragrance even before it is heated

*Without heat, most Aloeswood incense does not give off an aroma. Rare Cedar, however, offers a cloud of fragrance even when it is cold. Some other kinds of Aloeswood are slightly fragrant when smelling the wood itself, but none as pronouncedly or with as much depth.*

☞ Rare Cedar changes as you burn it

*When heated, Aloeswood’s fragrance is very stable, but Rare Cedar’s aroma changes over time. At first Rare Cedar is very clear, then percolates into a honey smell and finishes with a strong fragrance that smells like milk. There is no incense known to man with as much complexity and gradation as Rare Cedar.*

☞ Rare Cedar is pliable and delicious to the taste

*Aloeswood incense tastes bitter, has a hard texture, and is not suitable for chewing. Rare Cedar is pliable and can be chewed. When first placed in the mouth, it is a bit bitter, turning spicy and finally leaving the tip of your tongue numb and tingling.*

☞ Rare Cedar is soft

*Though surrounded by wood, Rare Cedar has a soft texture. The resin can easily be pared out with a knife; the shavings will roll up and can be kneaded into a pellet-shape. Aloeswood has a hard texture, and cutting it is similar to cutting bamboo. But Rare Cedar incense is as soft as sand.*