

傳統香道操作

INCENSE CEREMONY

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A traditional incense ceremony is calming, centering the one preparing the incense and the guests. It is performed with the same heart-centered mindfulness as a tea ceremony. Like tea, it also utilizes our senses to awaken the spirit and calm the mind; and also like tea, it restores a feeling of connection with Nature. In this article, we'll take a photographic journey through an incense ceremony that will hopefully make you feel like you were there, at least until you can come visit us at the Center!

香道



Far Eastern people have been conducting incense ceremonies since at least the Tang Dynasty (618–907 C.E.). In the courts of China and Japan, nobles would smell various kinds of incense in spiritual, austere settings as well as more jovial gatherings, often incorporating games based on guessing which kind of incense was being burned or composing poems about the various fragrances. These ceremonies were akin to tea ceremonies, in that they demanded presence, attention to detail, focus on the senses and alluded to Daoist and Zen ideals.

In Japan, the incense ceremony is called the Way of Incense (*Kodo*, 香道). The incense ceremony, like

other arts including tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), became a way to share the Zen-mind. According to Japanese myths, Aloeswood was first discovered in Japan when a log of it drifted ashore from Vietnam. The sacred log was quickly brought to court and offered to the emperor. Later, the Way of Incense was used by Zen monks, alone and to greet lay guests. It also became popular amongst courtiers and the samurai, who sometimes would have an incense ceremony and/or tea before facing death in battle. In the 16th century, a beautiful poem listing the benefits of the incense ceremony was popularized (Far-Eastern poetry is replete with lists), though the author remains anonymous.

We often incorporate traditional incense ceremony into our weekly whisked tea ceremonies (*chanoyu*) here at the Center. We find that the same focus, mindfulness and sacred energy are present in an incense ceremony as are for tea. The Aloeswood calms the mind and purifies the body and spirit, preparing you for the tea that follows. Also, the incense ceremony becomes an offering to Tea herself, to the occasion and to our higher selves (Buddha). They are both based on a return to our hearts and a mindfulness through discipline.

While the traditional Japanese and Chinese incense ceremonies included many kinds of fragrant woods, like sandalwood and others, we almost always use Aloeswood as it has such a positive relationship to Tea.

We thought it would be worthwhile to introduce the utensils and

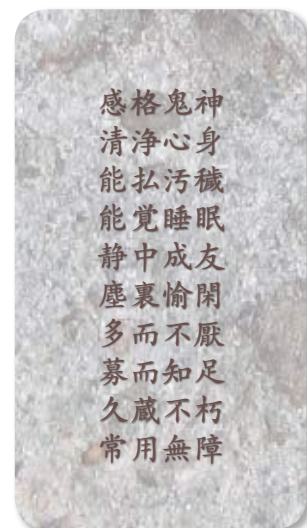
steps in a traditional incense ceremony, should you like to conduct one before your tea. Of course, there are many different ways to enjoy incense. You can burn a stick or coil (like this month's gift), or lay powdered incense in a trail within a censer. Here, we will demonstrate the more traditional way. Roasting the Aloeswood itself will always produce the best fragrance. Burning destroys the oils too quickly and diminishes many of the more subtle notes in fine Aloeswood. By roasting with charcoal, one slowly evaporates the oils from the wood, releasing the fragrance slowly and with a much more full-bodied aroma. Afterwards, we will also show you how to make a patterned "stamp" of powder.

Like tea, an incense ceremony awakens all the senses, filling us with the world. When our senses meet something beyond just pleasure—something that fulfills and harmonizes them—there is always the potential for transcendence if we let go. If we constrict, on the other hand, we may step back and enjoy the pleasure, creating attachment. We should be as the incense: formless and full. Using photography and some descriptions we hope to not only share how a traditional incense ceremony is performed, but also inspire you to the same transcendence open to the guests at such a ceremony. Maybe these pages will have a fragrance all their own.

Let's start with an exploration of all the utensils used in a traditional incense ceremony, before moving on to the steps themselves.



*Sharpens the senses
Purifies you, body and soul
Expels impurities
Awakens the spirit
Eliminates loneliness
Brings peace to unsettled times
Is never unpleasant, even in extravagance
A tiny amount is sufficient
Lasts for a very long time
There is no one it isn't good for*



Ash spatula

Ash fan

Incense chopsticks

Incense spoon

Ash tamper

Feather duster

Silver leaf pincers

*Mold or "stamp" for laying
incense powder in a pattern
across an open censer.*

*Mica sheet and holder for five
"silver leaves." Other kinds of
sheets for roasting incense are
also used, like ceramic, sil-
ver, gold and even jade. In our
experience, silver plates are the
best for Aloeswood.*

Open censer



Pure white rice paper ash is used for the incense ceremony. In the West, we call it "rice paper," though it is not, and never was made of rice; it is called this because of its color. When high-quality calligraphy paper is burned, the ash is clear and clean. It is also ideal for an open brazier used to heat water for tea.



Vietnamese Aloeswood

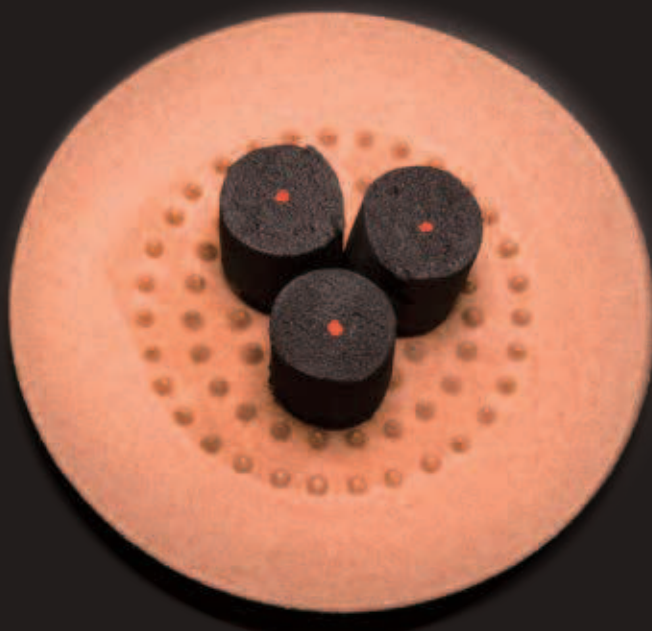


Indonesian Aloeswood



Closed censer

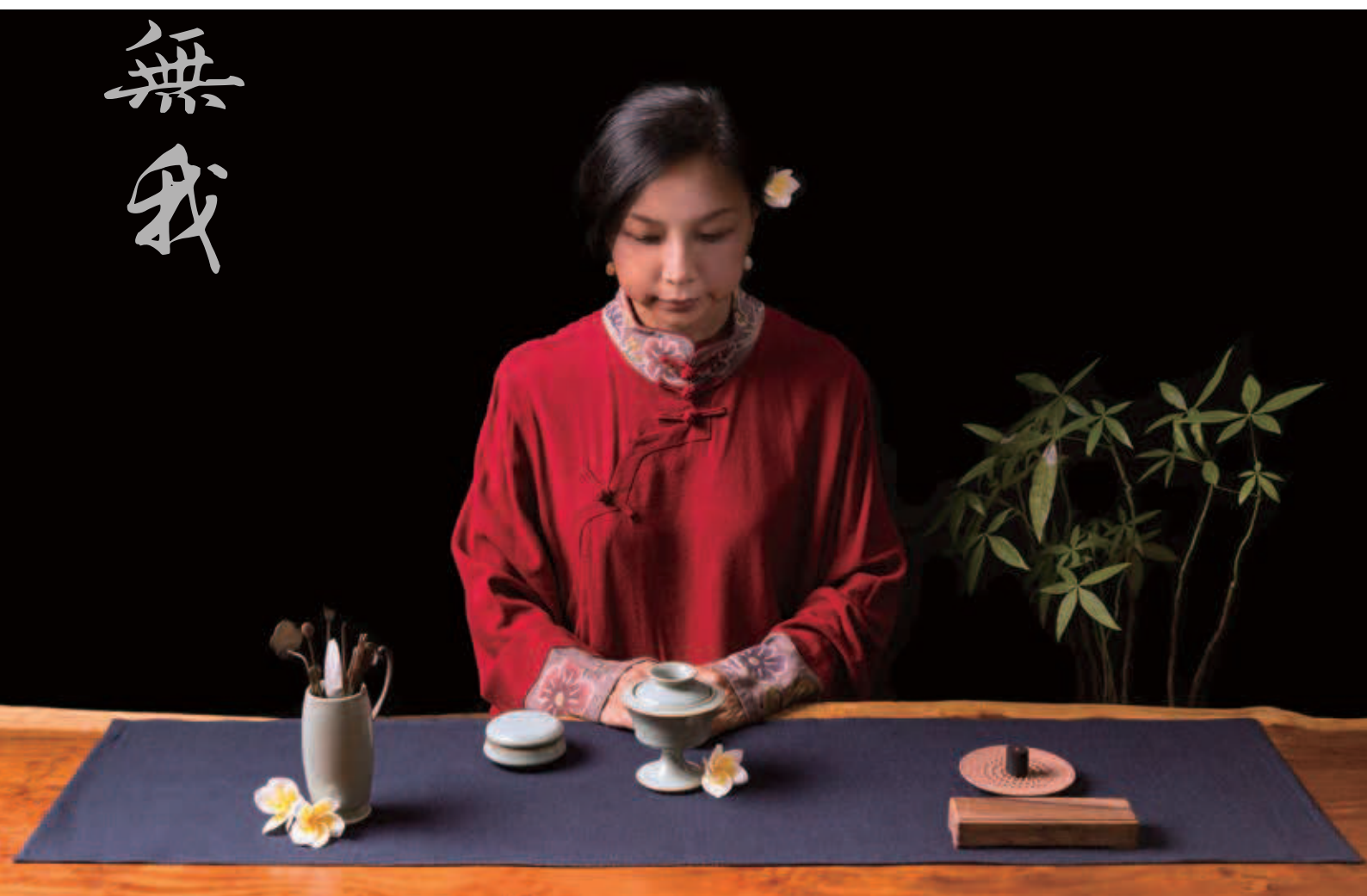
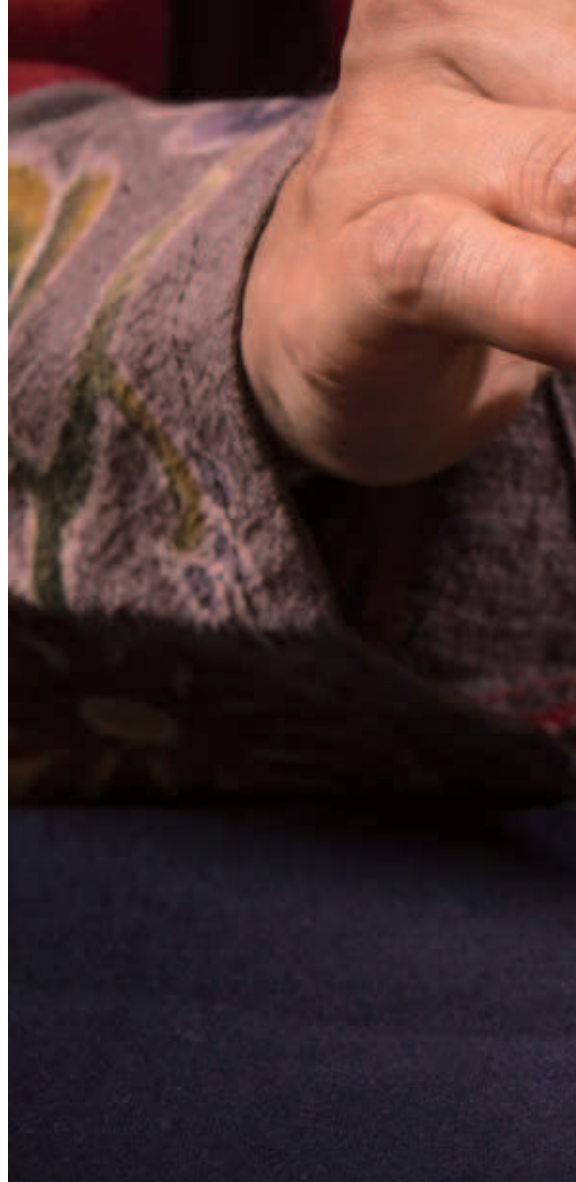
Special oak charcoal from Japan (sumi). It is self-lighting and burns for quite some time, especially when covered in ash. The plate is for lighting the coal as one prepares the ash bed.





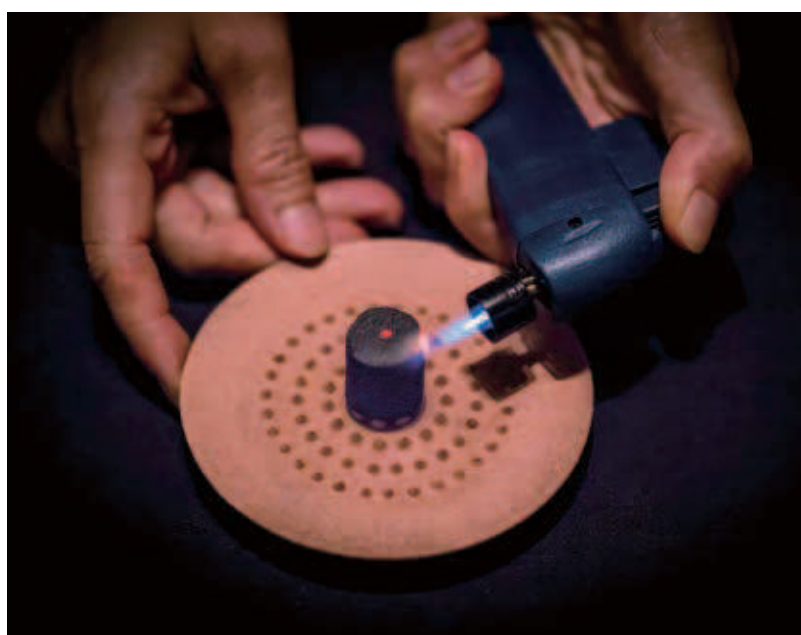
最美境
香氣中
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1) Create a decorative space to enjoy your incense ceremony, honoring your guests and the occasion, much like arranging a chaxi. Start with some deep breaths, calming the mind. Like tea, the heart of the one preparing the incense will matter more than which utensils are used or even the quality of the Aloeswood itself.





2) Light the charcoal on the lighting dish. Most Japanese charcoal for incense ceremony is self-lighting, so you just need to start it and it will get burning on its own in a short time. Antique lighting dishes have criss-crossed metal wires to hold the charcoal above the plate. At the Center, we often use traditional charcoal from the dragon eye tree (龍眼), and use other charcoal (usually left over from tea) to start the piece for incense ceremony. This is, of course, better than using a lighter, but we wanted to show you the most popular and convenient method.





3) Use the chopsticks to fluff the rice-paper ash, which increases oxygen flow. (It also reduced humidity in our case, since Taiwan has a very wet atmosphere.)



4) Make a hole in the center of the ash and grab the lit charcoal with the chopsticks, gently placing it into the hole, covering it over after you place it properly. You have to make sure that the charcoal is thoroughly lit and only then cover it in ash.



5) Round the ash into a rough mound using the chopsticks and ash fan. Then flatten it using the ash flattener and ash fan.



6) Shape the ash. Using the ash fan, ash flattener, spatula and a chopstick, you can decorate the ash, keeping it in a pyramid or cone shape all the while. You can draw any pattern you like, celebrating the occasion (again, like arranging a chaxi for tea).



7) Clean off the censer with the feather brush.

8) With a chopstick, twirl a small hole from the top of the cone of ash down to the burning charcoal, so that the heat can rise up through the hole like a small volcano.





9) Use the tweezers to place a mica sheet gently on the hole, careful not to knock ash down into the hole and dampen the heat.



10) Carefully carve a rice-grain-sized sliver of Aloeswood off and use the incense spoon to place it in the center of the mica sheet. (You can also use incense powder here.)



11) Place the lid on the censer, if you have one, and pass it around. Holding the censer with two hands (much like a tea bowl), keep it around 10cm (5 inches) below your nose. Cover the front with your off-hand. Inhale, slow and deep, taking the Aloeswood into your toes, and beyond to the spirit. Lower the whole censer to your mid-chest to exhale so you don't blow the ash or incense around. Pass the incense around several times in silence, letting Nature's glory fill your senses!







1) In a flatter, wider, more open censer; flatten the ash using the ash flattener. Compress it so that it is hard and flat. Clean off the censer with the feather brush.



2) Place the incense mold down onto the hard ash and fill the gaps with powdered incense using the incense spoon. Use the spatula to compact the incense powder.



3) Slowly lift the incense mold up, leaving behind a beautiful pattern of incense powder. Light one end of the powder and very gently blow out the flame so you don't disturb the pattern. Pass the censer around like with the traditional ceremony, but this time you will want to hold the censer a bit lower since there is actual smoke.

