

THE FIRST ANNUAL GLOBAL TEA HUT



🍵👤: *Signe Sillasoo, Estonia*

It has been months since I saw stars so bright. There were thousands of them if you but stood still and watched. In the center of Tallinn, where I live, like every city, there is no such luxury—streetlights, computers and TV screens glow out from windows instead. I drift from here back to our retreat in Spain...

Now I'm standing and watching thousands of stars cross the sky. The more I watch, the more deeply I see them. I'm enjoying the moment and reminiscing about childhood. While at camp in a small village out in Nature, I snuck out one clear August night to watch stars like these. It was magical...

It's October, and almost ten in the evening. All the others are preparing to go to sleep in the house. I should go and do the same, but I'm cherishing the view of the Pyrenees around me: the calmness of the village and the infinite sky, which has obviously affected me deeply. Soon there will be another, new day—full of tea, meditation and hiking in the mountains...

Tea class is starting soon... After meditation, breakfast and a silent walk outside, I'm sitting on the floor, enjoying silence and the view from the windows. Before I arrived at Casa Cuadrau, I had very little expectations. I still have few. I'm going with the

flow, letting myself experience all the feelings, thoughts and emotions that arise. Wu De is sitting in the middle of the room and is starting to prepare tea. We drink three bowls in silence. Soon, Wu De starts to speak about Nature, Tea, mindfulness, serving tea. I'm listening...

Over the course of the week, my notebook has filled with quotes, insights and random thoughts. One of them is "*osoji*." It means a deep "spring cleaning"—the kind where you not only wipe the dust away but take everything you have out of the house, even the furniture. Later, you can then bring back in the things that



ZEN & TEA RETREAT

This year began our first annual Zen & Tea Retreat at the amazing center Casa Caudrau, tucked into the stunning Spanish Pyrenees. More than two dozen Chajin from all over the world traveled to share tea and meditation, wonderful food and breathtaking hikes. The experience was glorious. And, as usual, all of you, our beloved Global Tea Hut community, were there with us in spirit. We spoke of you, sent loving-kindness to you, and now, through the writings of several participants, we hope to share the wisdom and insights of those unforgettable days with you. And if that isn't enough, and you're still feeling left out, take heart, for there is another Zen & Tea Retreat coming this October! Most of the gorgeous photography in this article was made by Rich Allum & Andrus Kiisküla.

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really support and are important to you, getting rid of the rest. Although I dust regularly at home (and in my mind through meditation), I like the idea of a metaphorically and literally deeper cleaning. Our dogmas, beliefs and ideas are not fixed. Like furniture, they are changeable, and throwing some out creates new space, whether it be in our homes or in our minds. It has been our task to practice *osoji* during the week, in our lives and minds.

Another idea that I have written down is “space.” This has touched me deeply, because I have always been a busy person, loading myself with tons of tasks. And work has sometimes

been my way of escaping, postponing the most important things in my life. I have broken under the burden of busyness; I have burned out. Once I recovered from that, I experienced that doing less is a way to do things *more* meaningfully, to create peace and balance in our physical world and minds. We have definitely done that this week.

The third important insight in my notebook is “respect.” Wu De says that our problem is not that we lack mindfulness, but rather respect. At first, this surprises me. I think about it a lot. Respecting ourselves, others, Nature, events and even the smallest things like our tea bowls makes us mindful...

Ming Hui is now pouring out the last tea Wu De will make. Afterwards, Wu tells us about our homework: to drink three bowls of tea every morning and to take one day a week where you plan to do nothing, *absolutely nothing!*

Like the stars in the sky, the roots of all this wisdom—making space, respecting myself and everything around me, not stagnating, loving change, creating new habits and being the higher self inside me, etc.—all these insights have been inside me a very long time. I think about that after the last sip of the retreat's last bowl. I have felt the urge for these changes pulling at me from within my heart.

This trip has been like washing the dust away from this innate knowledge; it has been like standing still and watching the sky and stars. The more you make space, take time and look inside yourself, the more you see, feel and understand. I'm thankful for this week and everything that I've experienced.

I grab my notebook and pack it in my suitcase. Everything is swirling inside me, but I recall standing still to see the stars. *I must remember to be like tea and watch the stars!* —茶道—

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茶人: Morten Menge, Germany

When it came to my holiday planning for the end of 2016, I was unsure what to do. All I knew was that I wanted to do something “quiet.” Then I remembered a retreat Wu De had told me about a while ago: he was coming to Spain to teach tea. He said the teachings would be accompanied by many opportunities to hike and meditate. But what really made the retreat sound exciting was that the whole thing would take place in the mountains, in a small town in the Spanish Pyrenees. He also said that we would actually make our tea with local water from the mountains, which we would gather ourselves. What could be more exciting for a tea person than that? So I made my decision to go, checked if there was still availability and was lucky. I got one of the last spots. I wanted to combine my stay in the mountains with a weekend in Barcelona, so I checked with my tea friend, Nuria, to see if she would be around to hang out with and, amazingly, she was actually also scheduled to participate in the retreat. My excitement for the whole trip could not have been any greater!

The length of the retreat was six days, from Saturday to Friday. On Saturday, all the participants arrived either individually or in a big van. It was a good bunch of people, who had come from around the world to Casa Cuadrau, our retreat center. Most of us met close to the Barcelona train station and got picked up there by a bus driver. As it was a trip of around four hours

from Barcelona to Casa Cuadrau, it was a good opportunity to get to know some of the people that would be attending the retreat.

People had come from many different countries, including Estonia, Spain, England, Canada, the U.S. and Germany. Most of them were rather new to the practice of tea and didn't really know what to expect from the days to come. I enjoyed the bus ride through Spain, talking with the other people, so time passed quite quickly. We were all surprised in the beginning, as we never seemed to enter mountain terrain, but the last forty-five minutes were a steady, steep and rocky climb up into the mountains at last.

When we arrived, it was just how I'd envisioned it: a tiny town, consisting of maybe not more than five houses. All were made of old stones and had a rustic, medieval appeal to them. It all seemed so wonderfully isolated, and so quiet indeed. The town was surrounded by gorgeous mountains—colors from the dark, faded green of the many bushes to the gray and sand-yellow of the rocks, to the light brown of the earth. We were quite high up, so there were not many trees around, and you could therefore see very far into the distance. The whole scenery left an impression of seclusion, scarcity, endlessness—the perfect place for reflection, meditation and tea!

One of the major contributors to making this trip so great was our host, Daniel. He lent a human voice to the Nature that surrounded us. He lives

in, and therefore resembles, the spirit of those mountains, bushes and stones. You could see that he dearly loves that place. It was also clear how much he enjoys sharing his love for it with other people. Daniel was a modest and honest person, just like everything around us. Each time I looked into Daniel's deep blue eyes when he was talking, I had the feeling I was diving into a lake high up in the mountains and was overcome with melancholy, love and compassion. Zen was deep in him too. I will not forget how he described the behavior of a local bush, using its nature to reflect on selflessness. The nature of that inconspicuous bush was to pave the way and create the right growing conditions for new trees to come. But as soon as the new have grown, it is the bush's fate to die, as the new trees will then claim all the sunlight for themselves. “This is a bush that has been giving for its entire existence, sacrificing life for new life. What an astonishing selfless act, and worth reflecting on,” he said.

It is probably no surprise to hear that one of my personal highlights on this trip were the silent morning walks through the area with Daniel as our guide. Right after breakfast, all of us would dress up in warm, rain-safe clothing and follow Daniel through his “living room.” His favorite spot, which he took us to several times, was a mountain cliff. Another spot was a little hill that gave you the opportunity to have a 360° view of the whole region. Daniel would smile, and without

茶 After breakfast, all of us would dress up in warm, rain-safe clothing and follow Daniel through his “living room.” He took us on magical, oh-so-silent hikes throughout the area. The views were breathtaking and the exercise was the perfect balance to the many hours we were spending in seated meditation. And it didn’t feel as if the hikes were distracting, but rather peaceful extensions of Zen & Tea...

pause, as you were looking at him, his whole expression would say: “Isn’t this just pure beauty?” As you can see, we were in good hands.

As the story goes, Daniel was living in a trailer up in these mountains for seven years and pretty much built up the whole center with his bare hands. He now lives there with his wife and young baby and has friends and volunteers living with him that keep the whole place going. At Casa Cuadrau, there are events and retreats happening throughout the whole year. The food you are served is organic and either grown by them or at least from the local area.

For the retreat, we followed a clear structure every day: we would get up early, before sunrise, and have a meditation session in the hall on the top floor of the house. That room was also the most special place in the house. Just like the rest of the house, it had wonderful wood floors, but what made it really special was the big windows afforded grand views of the mountains. While you were practicing, you could watch the sun rising or setting. It was beautiful.

After an hour of meditation and some morning chanting, we would all have breakfast together in silence. After that, everyone had the chance to shower and get ready for our morning walk in Nature. Each day, we took a different route and discovered new parts of our surroundings. After that, we would return to the house and have our first tea session of the day.



Wu De prepared tea and we all sat around in a half circle on the ground. Usually, we enjoyed three bowls of tea and silence, and then Wu De would start teaching about a specific aspect of tea, officially ending the noble silence for the day.

There were many people that were all new to the Way of Tea, so Wu De used the first sessions to provide a general understanding of what tea and tea practice are about. In the next sessions, he then built upon the lessons he had given and got more into the practical side of tea preparation.

For me, a rather experienced tea drinker, starting from scratch with the others was very helpful. I was already familiar with many of his teachings, but I was never taught them in such a linear and detailed way as at this retreat. I learned many new things and had some amazing insights as a result of the retreat, simply because we went so deep into each individual matter.

After his teaching, then there was always the opportunity for others to ask some questions. Then there was lunch. We were invited to choose from the great buffet that was prepared for us, and then decide to eat at the table in the dining room or take our tray of delicious food with us and eat outside.

Regarding weather during the retreat, we experienced two sides of the mountains. While the first three days were bright days with lots of sun, the others that followed were rather rainy. Both were beautiful. On two days, the weather even forced us to change our planned outdoor activities and stay closer to the center in rain gear, as it was too slippery due to the rain.

After lunch, more meditation followed, and another lesson of tea. At five we could have a snack, as there was no dinner in the evening. The evenings were devoted to meditation, followed by a Zen discourse from Wu De. After the discourse, which ended usually around 9pm, we would all go to bed.

The clear structure of the day, and the alignment of activities, reminded me of other meditation retreats I had been on before. Also, the one-hour meditation sessions were not new to me. I had the impression, however, that other participants were struggling with this part of the retreat. I am sure that many had practiced meditation before, but only a few had experienced

sitting for such a long time and the challenges that arise with that.

The one day that really stood out in terms of experience and scheduling, was the day when we went on a full-day hike rather than just a morning meditation walk. On that day, after breakfast, we packed our things and met in front of the house. We then went on a hike through the mountains, returning to Casa Cuadrau for dinner. The highlight of the day was when we came to a place right next to a river to rest and have a tea session. We gathered water from the nearby river and used that for a very special tea Wu De had brought along. We were perfectly equipped. Everybody had carried his or her own bowl and we had gas stoves and kettles, too. So we had all the necessary equipment to have tea in Nature.

Drinking tea in Nature is always something special. In this setting, we were using the natural water of the stream next to us and could hear its roaring sound while we were drinking the tea. We were also surrounded by a wall of mountains and felt perfectly sheltered. Then there was the sun warming our faces. And while we were sitting calm and silent, the tea began working in our minds and bodies. I remember feeling very grateful for this moment.

Towards the end of the retreat, we got to practice what we had learned. Everybody was given the opportunity to practice hosting a tea ceremony. We split into small groups of five to seven people and within the group people took turns in preparing tea. Everything was at the ready for the tea host—water, bowls, tea and the guests. When I was serving tea, for me, and maybe also for the others, the hardest part was to be the center of attention. While you prepare the tea, all eyes are on you and you tend to pressure yourself to do things perfectly. The more you do that, the more you learn to let go of that pressure, turning away from thinking too much and focusing more on what your hands are actually doing. The practice sessions certainly were not easy, but because they were not, in consequence the progress everyone made with each session was tremendous.

The retreat ended with a lot of love. After six days, we had gotten to know each other very well, so it really

felt like saying goodbye to long-time friends when we all split up. I got a lot out of those six days! I felt very centered afterwards. I arrived with quite a troubled mind at the retreat, but after three days, I began to settle down. I enjoyed the rigid schedule of the retreat, with many meditation sessions and, of course, the wonderful Nature hike.

I took countless lessons and insights home with me—on tea and also on many spiritual and life matters as well. There is still a lot to reflect on for me. In the end, I think that it was the good people who made this retreat so successful. It just felt so good to share time with all those warm-hearted people. I enjoyed getting to know them and learning from them. I loved being able to witness how their love for tea was growing and to see the progress they all made. It was lovely to see that not only I, but also all the others, went through such a positive transformation in those six days! I feel very grateful and enriched, as if a gallon of fuel has been added to my desire to share my love for tea with the rest of the world!

—茶道—



This is a story concerning Tea, a retreat in the silent Spanish mountains, a Zen monk, the best Tea community I know and a dude that, after long searching for it, has finally found some Light. Over and over during my years of Buddhist and Tea practice I kept hearing the universe saying this message: “You don’t do it for yourself. You can’t possibly do it for yourself. You need a larger motivation than your own personal happiness.” And over and over I’d say, “Yeah, sure,” but I didn’t really mean it. It wasn’t a surprise, then, to hear Wu De say the same thing multiple times during our Tea sessions: “Tea is not for yourself, Tea wants to be for everybody. In this tradition we don’t make tea, we serve tea.”

The mountains are stunning, the rural house we’re staying in is made of pure love, and yet I’m feeling quite grumpy: I want to do my own thing, not follow the strict retreat schedule. But with the passing of time and the long tea and meditation sessions starting to take effect, I start to see it: by always trying to say “me, me, me,” I have only damaged the possibility of happiness. Always trying to get things my own way, always busy trying to get more of what I want and pushing away what I don’t want—such a huge loss of

energy! It’s the default mode humans are often in, trying to change the world into what we want and not appreciating our current situation.

But during these beautiful quiet days in the mountains, something is changing in me. I feel more connected to Nature than ever before, and I also feel ever so grateful for everything I have, from the smallest detail to just being alive in itself. I feel unbelievably blessed for having met Tea, this community, and my Buddhist tradition, for being healthy, for the food I receive (and for countless other things). It takes a lot of sacrifice, effort and even suffering (even if you’re vegan, insects and plants will die on your behalf) to keep me alive. I feel more conscious of this than ever, not taking it for granted, but respecting the huge opportunity I have in having a human life and therefore knowing that I must make my life matter.

During the retreat, I complain: “I’m not sure if I like these sessions with all these people. I only go very deep when I drink Tea in the morning quietly on my own!” And Wu De answers: “Very well, but you will hit a ceiling really soon if you just keep Tea to yourself.” Buddhist teachings are “*Ehipassiko*,” literally “come-and-see-how-the-world-looks-from-here,”

so I decide to give it a try. I serve tea to small groups four times in the week following the retreat.

The first session is very well liked by the guests. The second session brings me and a member of my family closer than we’ve ever been before. In the third session, a lovely couple shows up and for a few hours we’re all three in the jungle. They express such strong love to each other and I’m deeply in love with them for having the opportunity to witness it. Lo and behold, this ends up being the “deepest” tea session (at least in terms of meditation) I’ve had to date! And finally, in the fourth session, only one friend shows up. I’m very eager to practice, but I sense that he may very well like leading the ceremony for the first time in his life, so I ask him to do so and step aside. All in all, I start to sense that this is what I am meant to be doing, creating the space for quiet to enter busy people’s lives and for Tea to be their Medicine too, not just mine.

A couple weeks later, I travel to Spain again for a series of workshops by Wu De. At my Airbnb, I serve tea to my host. As sometimes happens with beginner’s mind, she gets into a very deep meditative state and seeing this I cry and cry. The beauty I experience is so full, it’s almost violent,



feeling like my heart will explode. *This really is what I'm meant to do!* In this moment, sometimes clicks very strongly for me. It's as if I had been carrying a huge weight and I've finally set it down. I feel extremely blissful for the rest of the day, and since that day, I've started needing two hours less of sleep per night, like a huge reservoir of energy has been unlocked. It's as if something has permanently changed. I finally understand in my heart (and not just in my head) that it's not about me, it can't possibly be about me, that this "me" I so desperately try to defend against "the outside world" just isn't there, and that it's much more satisfying acting in accordance with how reality really is. Allow me to correct myself: it's not only that it's more satisfying, it's the only thing one can

possibly do to be in harmony with the universe! It's just like the silliness of putting chemicals on plants to "take care of them," as if Nature doesn't already know how to take care of itself! Nature has its Dao and so do humans, and to try to go against this flow will only lead to suffering. "If there's no 'I,' there is no one to suffer," "act in harmony with reality and happiness is guaranteed," "act from egoistic desire and soon it will not work and you will be hurt": saying things like these are simple, but really knowing it in your heart is amongst the deepest truths known to humanity.

When I think that I need to protect "my practice" above serving others, that I need to keep the best tea for myself, or that cleaning the retreat center is beneath me; when I don't treat

things and people with respect, when I judge others for what I consider "bad" brewing—all these are just poor ways of disguising the same old boring story that "I am the most important being in the universe." And that story has caused me so much pain. And so now I understand: *The more I serve, the less "I" there will be.*

—茶道—



As anyone who's been on any form of meditation retreat will tell you, talking about your experience afterwards seldom comes easy, especially in the beginning. The effects of even a short amount of time spent in deep contemplation can take weeks or months to unfold and rise to the surface of your consciousness, if they ever do at all. Whilst each person attending a retreat may be in the same place, attending the same events and hearing the same teachings on an external level, the internal experience is obviously infinitely wide and varied from person to person. I would like to attempt to give you a few glimpses into my own experience of Wu De's Tea and Zen retreat at the Casa Cuadrau retreat center in Spain back in October.

Firstly, it is also important for me to mention one other reason as to why my own experience in particular was slightly more unique on this retreat: Becky and I were accompanied by our nine month old son, Tobias. Shortly after becoming parents, Becky and I quickly discovered that our initial idea that life was going to be "more or less the same as before, just with an extra person" was as unrealistic as it now sounds. One thing in particular that we also realized, rather selfishly, was that our dreams of returning to Taiwan again to visit the Tea Sage Hut would not come to fruition for much longer than we'd initially hoped. Also, the total time we spent in the air on our last visit was around sixteen hours each way and that would not be fair to a young child, nor the hundreds of other people on board! Needless to say, when we discovered Wu De would be hosting a tea and Zen retreat in the much closer (and at the time of paying our deposit, much more affordable) location of Spain we jumped at the chance.

We contacted Casa Cuadrau, the place that the event was to take place, and received a reply from Katya explaining that she and her husband Dani (more on him later) had a daughter, Uma, who was only two months older than Tobias and that they would be happy to help in any way that they could so that we could bring our son with us. We expressed our concerns—from travel to sleeping, to feeding and entertaining Tobias whilst at the same time ensuring that our presence impacted the other retreatants as little

as possible. Katya's help was nothing short of incredible; she arranged everything, including alternative accommodation for us away from the main building. And that's where my story will start...

5:15am: The bells chime to signify the start of our first day on retreat—Wu De had previously explained that this would be sleeping in for most Zen practitioners on retreat! I slide out of my warm bed and place my feet on the cold tiled floor. The change in temperature serves as a powerful catalyst, helping me to make the transition from half asleep to wide awake in a fraction of a second. I dress and head downstairs, remembering to duck—this time at least—so as not to smash my forehead on one of the large wooden beams or doorframes that traditional houses such as this are renowned for. As I step outside, it hits me: *the silence*. There's barely a sound aside from a gentle breeze in the trees; no traffic, no voices, no birdsong, no music, no nothing. *Nada*. If it weren't for the fact that someone had rung the bell that woke me, I could have felt, just for a second, that I was the only person in the world. The other thing that stands out is the sky—it's *black*.

Light pollution is extremely minimal, consisting of half a dozen or so streetlights, which means the stars appear brighter to me than I've ever, ever seen them before. I take a few deep breaths of the sharp, cold air and crane my neck skywards for a few seconds before making the ten minute walk through the village towards the main building of Casa Cuadrau. The village itself consists of no more than a dozen buildings, some of which are still only partially restored after many of them fell to ruin when the village became almost uninhabited decades before. Upon arriving, I make my way up to the second floor, which houses the meditation hall. We hold noble silence until after breakfast and so the silence that immersed me outside continues to do so inside. I settle into the cross-legged position and it becomes increasingly apparent that the loudest things I have experienced since waking are the sounds of my own thoughts! We sit for around half an hour or so before chanting Wu De's translation of the Heart Sutra together and then heading downstairs for breakfast. Be-

fore we eat we all join hands whilst Wu De recites a prayer of gratitude (the Five Reflections covered in January's issue). We all then circumambulate the main dining table in a clockwise direction, collecting our food and cutlery, etc., so as not to crash into each other and disrupt the flow of things. At this point Becky and Tobias arrive. (Becky purposely arrives late to meal times so that everyone else has had their food and many of the others have already left the dining hall to wash up and prepare for the day ahead.) It's here that we have our first of many anxious parental experiences.

We knew that everyone else understood that babies make noise, and do so whenever they feel like it regardless of what social convention or meditation retreat in-house rules might dictate. What we didn't know was if everyone else knew that Tobias would be coming and if they were cool with that. Wu De had encouraged us to be aware of feelings such as this in an email the week prior, and even though I knew to look out for them, it still took me by surprise when they arose. I'd also like to take a few lines at this point to pay homage to the food that is served at Casa Cuadrau and the wonderful people who prepare it. Every single meal was amazing! If you've ever heard Wu De talk about the difference between food that is shop-bought and food that is homegrown and prepared with love, know that the truth of this lesson was evident for all present on this retreat.

After breakfast and a rest, we went on a short walking meditation, hiking into the hills above Casa Cuadrau. The views are stunning—*breathhtaking*! I've never felt more at one with Nature than I did during my time here. This feeling of stillness was then returned to the meditation hall as we all sat together again before our first tea session of the day. Watching Wu De gracefully prepare bowl tea for the group was blissful. Each of these tea sessions was similar in format but completely different in content. With each new day, Wu De would brew us a different tea—sometimes leaves in a bowl and sometimes using a sidehandle pot. Ming Hui and Antonio would then come around to fill our bowls for the second and third rounds, both in the morning and afternoon sessions, while Wu De gave us all kinds of teachings.

They related to various aspects of tea preparation and ceremony. The three of them worked tirelessly throughout the week: preparing, serving, cleaning, teaching. I know I speak for everyone who attended when I say that I am eternally grateful to them for their hours of selfless service.

Becky and I alternated days; whilst one of us attended the day's activities the other spent the day with Tobias. On my first day with him, the group were going to be hiking into the mountains to collect water for a special outdoor tea session. Fortunately for me, Katya was taking Uma along for part of the hike and Toby and I were invited to join them. Around an hour after the group had left, the four of us drove to meet them mid-way through the hike. We made perfect time, climbing down a path from where the car was parked to a bridge that crossed the river below. Dani, the architect and visionary behind Casa Cuadrau and our guide for the entire week, stopped many times throughout the hike to show us points of interest and impart his wisdom. His knowledge of the local area, its history, plant and animal life, never ceased to amaze me. We made our way around the cliffs, descending towards the river below, and it was here that I experienced the hardest part of the whole retreat, which subsequently has also been the hardest part to write about. Tobias was in a baby wrap and had spent much of the walk so far falling in and out of sleep against my chest, however at this point he had woken up and wasn't particularly happy about it. After we had walked a little further, he had become increasingly agitated and I had moved further and further back through the group, until I was eventually out of sight. Toby was obviously very upset and crying loudly which left me feeling embarrassed and frustrated at the thought of people judging him as a bad child or me as a bad father. The rational side of my brain knew that this was extremely unlikely as everyone seemed to be friendly, kind and compassionate; and, furthermore, nobody had made any negative comments towards us so far to give me such an impression, yet these feelings quickly intensified until I found myself walking the other way entirely, back the way I came and away from my group of friends.

After what felt like minutes, I realized I had become completely detached from the present moment and completely unaware of my son. I looked down and saw his face, bright red with sadness and tears in full flow. In an instant all of my rigidity melted away, I completely softened and effortlessly redirected all of my energy towards him—the way it should have been from the beginning. He soon fell asleep again and I was awash with shame. Just then, one of our guides, Lean, approached me, and his kind smile arrived at just the right time. He proceeded to explain how far the group was away from our current location and how I could go about getting to the destination that had been chosen for the tea ceremony before going on ahead to catch up with the others. Having been pulled out of my own inner turmoil and back into the Here-and-Now, I was again able to enjoy the bountiful beauty that surrounded me.

As I walked through the trees, I periodically caught glimpses of lush blue water glistening in the midday sun below, before eventually arriving at a clearing where the group had stopped for lunch. As Ming Hui, Antonio and Wu De prepared for the afternoon's session, Dani (who was now carrying Uma, allowing Katya to enjoy the tea) and I headed further up stream so that our children didn't disturb the others. As I removed my teaware from my bag and brewed us some Evening Sky dian hong (last year's is one of my favorite red teas), Dani talked about how he had discovered the village of Vió and about the construction of his home there. He then began talking about being a parent and gave me a very important lesson: I asked him how he balanced being a father with his daily practice. Looking at his daughter, he replied, "She is my meditation now." Such a simple and yet profound teaching struck me deeply and I realized that since Tobias was born I have used the title of "parent" as a barrier, an excuse for not continuing my practice, even though I know in my heart that this practice helps me to be the man I want to be, and the man that my partner and child deserve. Several days later at the end of the retreat, as I explained this to the group, Wu De gave me the affirmation: "My life is my practice," and I hope I'll always remember that!

Dani had compiled a list of tasks to be undertaken daily by each of the retreatants as part of a service period. I held out for a while as the jobs were called out, waiting for something that "felt" right, for want of a better expression. As luck would have it, Dani called for a few people to collect water for tea; my hand went up immediately before I'd even had time to think. When I visited Taiwan last year one of my favorite experiences was the hike into the mountains to collect water for tea and doing the same here was also a true joy—knowing many of the bowls drunk each day contained water I had collected was deeply nourishing and gave me a feeling of purpose.

Several times throughout the retreat we all had the opportunity to serve tea to one another under the expert guidance of Wu De and his *cha tongs*, putting into practice the lessons that we had learned. Some members of the group had served tea before and others were doing so for the first time. On one of these days, I was fortunate to drink tea served by five different people one after the other, and the contrast between the taste, texture and energy of each brewer's tea was staggering. We were using the same water, same bowls and same tea but the experience was vastly different. It was almost like the character of the brewer came across in their tea; I've read about this sensation before, but I can't explain just what it felt like to experience it in real time. I would, however, encourage you to try it out for yourselves with your friends and see what subtle nuances you can detect between each session. When it came to be my turn to serve, I was even surprised at how different my own bowls tasted in comparison to those served by the others. It gave me a little more insight into why I think that it is so vital to ensure that your heart is still before lifting the kettle; if my energy can really be passed into the bowls of my guests then I want to be sure I'm only transmitting positivity, love and kindness.

Ultimately, attending a retreat is much like looking at the landscape surrounding Casa Cuadrau; it's full of hills and valleys, peaks and troughs. There is also the contrasting feeling of being surrounded by love and yet being isolated and alone at the same time. Do I relish the stillness, or does



it make me unsettled? I think it's somewhere in the middle and sometimes it's easy to forget, especially when you visit somewhere as beautiful as the Spanish Pyrenees, that going on retreat *isn't* a holiday. On the contrary, it's hard work and not the kind most of us are accustomed to. Having my family there was wonderful and had they not been there, I would have missed them dearly, especially with Tobias being so young. He is making progress daily and I would hate to have missed even a single moment of that, but at the same time it did create its own challenges. Becky and I both felt, as Wu De predicted, that it was difficult to step in and out of the activities a day at a time, as it meant that we each missed vital parts of the retreat, which we then had to try and recount to each other at a later time. The days off were lonely, every day was long and sleep was in short supply, but ultimately it was all worth it. We met some truly incredible people with whom we hope to keep

in touch for many years to come and learned many lessons about serving tea (both physically and in spirit—another of my affirmations) and ourselves both as individuals and as part of the bigger picture.

It was also nice to finally meet some members of the Global Tea Hut community whom until then I had only spoken to through social media, giving each of them a big hug and getting to know them a little better. After our journey back to Barcelona and then home to Nottingham, England, we arrived thoroughly exhausted but equally energized, ready to continue along our path together as a family, with the Leaf as our guide. My account barely scratches the surface of what took place over those six days in Spain, both externally and internally. Believe me when I say that even a whole issue of Global Tea Hut magazine dedicated to my own single account wouldn't be enough to cover it all! We both learned a tremendous amount about ourselves.

Since the retreat, Becky and I have made time each morning for tea together, drinking three or more bowls in silence before going about our daily life. We had both forgotten how important this simple practice is, and it is once again clear to us how vital it is to return to the basics again and again, never forgetting where it all started. If you're ever in or around Nottingham, please know that there's always a space for you at our tea table and a steaming bowl of tea waiting for you...

-茶道-

茶人: Rivo Sarapik, Estonia

You guys must have really good tea karma, Wu De said in a national park in the Spanish Pyrenees, a few hundred kilometers northwest of Barcelona, during a week-long retreat focused on Tea and Zen. We had just hiked for a few hours from our retreat center at Casa Cuadrau in the small village of Vió, fetched water from a spring for tea and sat down right next to a waterfall. And there were eagles flying about a kilometer above us. He decided to say that statement partly because of the tea he was about to serve us, harvested from ancient trees only once in every few years—something you can't buy for all the money in the world. I guess we really were lucky, and not just because of the tea, but also the surroundings, people and time (which equals room) just for ourselves. What Wu De said returned to Estonia with me. Sure, I had been grateful to be in Spain with all these people, in the wild, learning about Zen and Tea. I had also wanted to go there, but in a way it had all happened rather casually, even accidentally. But when he said that, I did start to feel grateful. Back home, I started wondering, "What would happen if I really paid more attention and chose the path of tea?" So I decided to do just that, and set out on my way.

This required changing some things, though. I've learned from training for ultra-endurance sports (beyond marathons, lasting days and sometimes even weeks) that marginal effort can often result in huge gains. I decided to start with three practical changes to my life:

Make Time & Space

Our days in Spain lasted up to sixteen hours, from 5:30am until 9:30pm. And yet, I've never been so sharp from the beginning to the end of a day—eager to listen and learn and not tired at all (especially emotionally). I was also happy, feeling a sincere and simple joy and gratefulness for just being alive, watching the sun, fetching water from the spring or writing down a few sentences from the discourses which moved me. I think this was primarily due to meditation—several hours

a day, from walking to sitting to tea ceremonies. I had meditated regularly at home before, but usually not more than thirty minutes a day. I decided to extend that, and have since added time and sessions here and there. Now I'm up to an hour and a half every day: first thing in the morning at 5:30, and then last thing at night before shutting my eyes. Waking up before most people and taking the time to adjust my mood and tempo before heading out has had a significant effect on my life. It's amazing that something so simple as focusing on my breathing, followed by three bowls of tea, prepared with my full attention, has made everything better. *Everything.*

Drink Less & More

In a way I drink less tea now. On the other hand, I drink a lot more. I used to have three to four different teas in a day, and now I might have just one that lasts for a few days. First, I steep it all the way until the end, and then I boil it more for the following days. I've found that the desire to taste different stories in various teas was often fueled by my ego. I wanted to taste more and more. Having tea mindfully offers something different. Trying to capture everything a tea has to offer, from the first flavorful steeps to the deeper, clear, mineral boils, makes the experience of any tea a lot deeper and more worthwhile than just collecting flavors. So, as I said, I drink less but also receive more.

Just Do It

"If nothing changes, nothing changes," was one of the sentences I wrote down during our retreat. It's easy to fall into a cycle of discontent and complain about how we're always too busy. This had to stop. A week of concentrated effort towards meditation and tea showed me that change needs its own time and space. To me that means doing less, cleaning up my schedule and leaving room for simple things like breathing (literally). Amazingly, I have found this eventually leads to doing more.

—茶道—

茶會茶喝少多心靈

茶人: Antonio Moreno, Spain

Wu De visited Barcelona this past October and with the help of our brothers and sisters in Germany and the Czech Republic we organized a jam-packed (literally, mind you, courtesy of Cye Wood) one-month European tour. Wu often reminds us that the first note sets the tone of the symphony, so we began on the highest note possible, invoking the very highest frequency, making a pilgrimage to a pitch-perfect location for a six-day Zen and Tea retreat in the Spanish Pyrenees.

We chose the Spanish Pyrenees for obvious reasons: tremendous beauty, revered remoteness, proximity to Barcelona, pristine glacial water; and for reasons that were less obvious until you actually arrived there and realized that our dear friends Daniel and Katya have created the most harmonious retreat center you could hope for!

Almost ten years ago this lovely couple came to the small town of Vió, at the gates of Monte Perdido (Lost Mountain National Park) and rebuilt a three-story house in what was an abandoned corner of the world. Today, the small town is alive with the pulse of the people who attend weekly retreats at Casa Cuadrau. Anything I write about our retreat has to be preceded by my gratitude for the team at Casa Cuadrau and my admiration for their cohesion as a unit. The entire staff served the retreat with utmost grace, respect and love, while nourishing our souls with delicious local produce and hearty organic vegetarian meals that were always cooked to perfection. *Kudos! Chapeau!*

It was in this incredible setting that we spent six days meditating, walking in Nature, performing and receiving tea ceremonies and learning about tea, with discourses on Zen and tea and time to practice what we learned and share our Zen with each other.

Daniel and Lean took us on wonderful walking meditations where we contemplated our breath and the breath-taking scenery, before us the gentle unfolding landscape of the perpetual continental collision that first began 25–80 million years ago when the Iberian plate met the Eurasian plate and formed the Pyrenees. Daniel guided us through trails, pointing out flo-

ra and fauna and describing poignant tales of their survival and adaptation. However, most of the time during our hikes was spent in silence, amplified by the mountains around us. We trekked alongside glacial rivers, bathing our feet in the chilly, refreshing waters, and prepared tea beside its flowing waters. We stopped and paid homage to the local Buddha: Saint Urbicius.

Wu De guided us internally. He is such a masterful teacher, flowing with wisdom, stories, analogies and parables. He will make a point and then take it in multiple directions, showing it through a prism of multiple perspectives—driving the point to your core of understanding so it can be processed and integrated. Yet, all the while, he reminded us to approach the retreat as an open vessel, to fill ourselves up and then take home with us whatever stuck, and leave behind whatever didn't.

In these mountains, in the *Shala* (meditation hall), meditation sessions flowed into tea sessions. Practice. Repetition. Water. Fire. Service. Attention. Presence. Return.

I learned and re-learned a lot that week. Some concepts entered at an intuitive level, others surely submerged in the unconscious and settled in, making themselves at home. Other teachings were non-verbal, captured in stillness—impossible for me to conjure up and paraphrase today; they penetrated spirit and disappeared, swallowed by symbiosis. Surely they will surface unannounced, unbeckoned, unsummoned, naturally and non-verbally in the form of presence.

Here are some of the truths that I took home with me and share with you now:

茶 *We always lose when we argue with Reality.*

茶 *Form your vision to suit the world as it is, not the world to your vision.*

茶 *Making space for meditation is the primary meditation.*

茶 *We find growth in the valleys (not the peaks).*

茶 *Right now, right here, I am free.*

茶 *If not now, then when?*

茶 *Kaizen—student for life!*

茶 *Perfect yourself & brew naturally.*

茶 *There is no neutral element in art. If an element of chaxi or any other art is not enhancing, it's taking away.*

茶 *I always have control over my orientation.*

茶 *The journey is the destination.*

茶 *The “no-big-deal-me.”*

茶 *The Ocean is the most powerful force in Nature because it puts itself beneath everything else.*

茶 *We all have chips in our paint.*

茶 *Fix the problem, not the blame.*

茶 *Osoji. Osoji. Osoji. (A Japanese word for spring cleaning; in this case cleaning out the mind.)*

In between each simple line I've listed here lies the actual grit of practice: the sinking-in, the assimilation, the embodiment and the room for growth. In those gaps, there is also the realization that in the end, there is only so much I can say—only so much that truly needs to be said. Actions. *We need actions*, with some grace and gratitude sprinkled on top!

I am so grateful for meeting and sharing this time, this space, with all the wonderful people who came from all around the world, many of whom I know I will meet again, various of whom I already have. And to all of you whom I have not met yet, who share this way of tea, I raise a steaming bowl of tea for thee!

As I reflect on this retreat, the whole team of Casa Cuadrau has just announced that they are coming down to Barcelona to visit us at our teahouse. What a fortuitous surprise! Stay tuned for the details... *We're planning another Zen and Tea retreat with Wu De this October, 2017! See you there!*

