

THE FOUR PILLARS

We thought you would like to know some more about where this tradition comes from. Here are the four pillars on which it is founded. We will include some more information in future issues.

The Way of Tea as we rediscover and recreate it (or it us) must firstly pay homage to Nature, Heaven and Earth from whose unspoken center people and tea trees grow. Then through a vast and ancient mountain chain of tea wisdom, we also travel down the trails blazed by all the great known and unknown sages of tea: those who cloudwalked early Chinese peaks, retreated to forest hermitages, or practiced Zen tea in Japan and Korea, as well as the gongfu skills of Southern Chinese tea traditions. More specifically, we bow to modern teachers of tea throughout the world, less for preserving tradition and form than for keeping and sharing the spirit of the Leaf then and now. Like such ancient tea sages, we promote, cultivate and express an awakening of harmony through tea, at a time when it is so very needed in the world; and like those before us we do so simply and without asking anything in return.

There are four pillars which support the building on which any modern practice of tea must begin, and upon which our particular tradition is founded. Understanding them is very important if one is to make progress in Cha Dao. It would be impossible for us to transmit any of the tea wisdom we have without these forces flowing through us. After all, none of our wisdom is new. It has been around for millennia. And none of it is our creation; we are merely the vessels in which it is steeped just before it is poured for you. Without our ancestors and teachers we would all be lost. Any intelligent person can learn algebra in a year or two with a competent teacher, but how many could invent it growing up isolated on an island? Even with a hundred lifetimes spent only brewing tea,

some of the insights passing through us like minerals through these four great roots would be missing.

The First Pillar: Great Nature

For a million years, tea trees grew in ancient forests untouched by man. They sat in the silence of Nature—the same ocean of spirit out of which this sun grew, and eventually this earth, rivers then mountains, cells then plants, then animals... And so a thousand page book on Cha Dao would have to include 999 pages written in the language of Nature: bird chirps, wind-rustled leaves and shafts of sun slanting through ancient tea trees. We mustn't forget to pay homage to this aspect of tea, for it is in connection to this Great Spirit of Nature that tea becomes a Dao, and of all the four pillars, this one is the strongest—the oldest and the deepest rooted. In fact, it resembles a tree—twisted and turned, plunging into the darkest part of the earth. It is also the least understood pillar, and it cannot be discussed in any detail in such a manual as this. Its voice is old, cracked and whispers indecipherables to the intellect. You must become spirit if you are to understand its spirit. You must learn its language, written in the runes of the leaf-veins themselves.

The Second Pillar: Shamans and Daoist hermits

The second pillar of this great and ancient tea temple, covered in vines and runes, spells and magic and filled with fragrances and spirits wise and quiet, is the essence of the ancient shamans and Daoist mendicants who retreated to forest hermitages and mountain peaks in ancient times. Many tea books are

written by historians, and such scholars must necessarily begin when tea is first mentioned in writing, which is for all practical purposes the Tang Dynasty (618–907). But mankind's relationship with this sacred herb dates back thousands of years before that. And so the buying and selling, the warring and pleasuring of tea are also the very end of a long story as tea relates to humanity. These forest sages didn't farm tea, but sought it out wild. Some such trees were even famous, as were some of the sages that distilled its liquor. At first, it was aboriginal shamans, medicine men and witches of the forest that drank tea, utilizing it to transmute their own spirits, as healing for others—healing of body, mind and spirit—as well as to transmit wisdom to students. Later, Daoist mendicants would also develop a love for tea. It is important for us to bow to this old forest tradition, and to learn from it by listening to the spirit of these ancient sages as they come alive again in this tradition, however out of time and place it seems.

The Third Pillar: Dhyana

The third pillar of tea is an iron one, straight and smooth—black and radiant to the point of perfect reflection. Like all things tea, the domestication of tea was also sacred. The first farmers were Zen monks. When the early Japanese monks traveled to China to learn Zen, which was called “Chan” there, they also came back with tea seeds, saplings, teaware and preparation methodology. They wrote treatises on the magic of this plant to satisfy the looks of askance on the faces of those who had sent them. After all, they had been sent to copy Buddhist scriptures and bring back Zen, not to study plants. Why this particular plant? Obviously the masters of China, sage indeed, knew that if Zen were to be planted in Japan, tea would also have to be, as the two share “the same flavor.” There are countless Zen stories that involve tea, and every famous tea mountain in China is also home to a Zen monastery. They either built it there

because of wild tea trees, or later brought the trees with them—choosing a place where the tea, not necessarily they themselves, would be happy. For the most part, China lost this tradition of Zen tea. It was fortunately preserved, cultivated and even enhanced in Japan and Korea. And no temple of tea would stand without a pillar founded in Zen tea. We were very fortunate to receive this wisdom in Japan, passed on in spirit and form.

The Fourth Pillar: Gongfu tea

The final pillar is a crooked one, shaped like a graceful crane: perched on one leg, the other rooted beneath the floor; and the roof balanced magically on the smallest tip of one feather of one extended wing. This tradition is the gong fu tea of Southern China, which was developed for the most part by practitioners of martial arts. This tradition is looser and freer. It is an artless art, without any rules, other than those that produce the finest cup of tea. Gong fu tea is about mastery, inner and outer. It is about learning to brew tea the way it wants to be brewed, until the subtlest and most refined aspects of the process become clear as day. Like in martial arts, there is no halfway—you hit or miss based on your skill. The proof is in the cup. We are very fortunate to have come into contact with a very pure tradition of gong fu tea, as it was preserved and enhanced in Malaysia. Many modern traditions have lost the inner aspects of gong fu tea. Without a deep understanding of the inner reasons behind each aspect of tea preparation, many of the outer, more practical aspects of tea have been replaced with quicker and more convenient methods in these modern times.

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