

CULTIVATING YOUR OWN TEA TREE

This article was written by our very own Kai Ya, the Magnificent, of course.

Looking back over the last couple of years from the time when I first entered the gates of our center, I find myself a little shocked at just how enormously my life has changed. Tea has become such a fundamental part of who I am that I am often oblivious to the impact it's having on me. Plants move slowly, after all; but when you do get around to noticing them every few months, you see just how far they have danced and turned, reaching up for the Spirit in the sky. If you had a time-lapse, you'd see each stem and leaf, flower and stamen dance and sway with a vibrancy all their own. To do that, though, you'd have to slow down the mind to their pace. And when I do slow down like that, I can see just how far my own inner tea tree has grown.

Where I grew up, iced tea was a regional specialty of sorts, and my father was amongst those that loved it. As a kid, I didn't really care for it, but I remember that I would often take a sip anyway, as though checking to see if my taste had changed. It wasn't until my college days, however, that the seed of Cha Dao was planted in my life.

I bought some green tea one day after reading about its health benefits, to complement my diet and exercise regimen at the time. Unconsciously, I chose to drink it at one of the best possible times: around dawn and before breakfast. What stood out to me was that it seemed intrinsically suited to the rising of a new sun. It was the only quiet time in my life then, and I soon found myself waking up more easily, earlier and looking forward to having tea. For some reason, though, I didn't explore tea any further, and remained ignorant of the unlimited potential in this so unassumingly planted seed—a seed that would finally germinate closer to its home in Taiwan.

Without effort or design, just vague inquiries here and there as I wandered Taiwan deciding where to live, I found myself walking through the door of Tea Sage Hut for the first time, only two months in the country. With all my impressions about tea being a hobby, business, or beverage, I was taken completely by surprise. Here was a place that vibrated with tea, where that quiet voice I had heard in my apartment was given volume and color and form in a hundred different ways. Here was a teacher who seemed not like someone who had 'gotten into tea' but rather like someone who had sprung up out of it, an embodied tea bush.

Less than two years later, I live just a stone's throw from the center, my home has two tea rooms and another room just to store my tea and teaware, and I spend every bit of my time and energy in serving, maintaining and making tea in the center and the tea spaces I've created. This fertilizer has sprouted the seed of tea that was planted in my heart back in America and it has now taken root, growing at a tremendous pace, even after years of dormancy. And like any good metaphorical seed, you could say that I have died to my old self, the change has been so great.

So the obvious question is, what happened? Why not just drink tea like before? Why all the fuss? Is this all necessary just to enjoy some peace and quiet? The tea I drank in college was so simple, without any ado. I sat in an armchair and read a book while the kettle (into which I simply threw the tea) boiled on the stove. Then I would put the book down and just sit and drink my mug there in the kitchen. The simplest answer is that the tea wants to be drunk in a way that respects its being. The tea space is at the request of the tea, which is our distinguished and honored guest whom we wish to please.

As a result, I have been rewarded with an ever deepening conversation with tea, and it teaches me so much more now than how to enjoy a simple cup of quiet in the morning. Rather than asking the tea to bring quiet to me, I'm learning how to quiet my own mind so that I can better hear what the tea has to say. In this deepening connection, I've learned more of the interconnectedness of all things, and my compassion and humility towards other beings has grown. My mind and my home have grown less and less cluttered, and I've even seen years-old physical ailments slowly wither away into nothingness. And as these many buds grow and blossom with new insights, I've found that a few have even been cultivated to the point that I can begin to pick them and steep them amongst the leaves in my pot, greatly improving the quality of my tea!

But without a doubt, most rewarding of all has been the opportunity to participate in giving others a chance to experience the same growth and transformation that I have, and this is why we emphasize the fact that we are learning to "serve tea" here, rather than make it for ourselves. After all, I remember what an impact the Center had on me when I first arrived. Everything in it springs up from listening to tea, and

so everything in it also promotes and assists visitors in listening to tea as well. I know that there isn't any detail that does not add to this, and so whether it be sweeping, mopping, carrying water and filling kettles or scrubbing the fishpond, I'm eager to help.

One of the great beauties of tea is that it covers the whole gamut of human experience, and there are teas happy to be drunk in every conceivable way. In that spirit, we offer a space here where anyone can come and converse with tea in their own way, to

whatever extent they wish. I know that many of you will find your way here and find a bit of what I have found, or even more, and I look forward to meeting you. In the meantime, however, I hope that you will drink deeply of this tea and continue to cultivate your own conversations with our mutual teacher—the Leaf...

