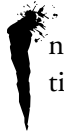


*I breathe in. I breathe out. I keep my mind on the flow.*



In August, I arrived at the Tea Sage Hut for the third time. This time, it was to stay for a long while.

The daily rhythm of life at the center quickly provided a framework for spiritual development. Each morning, I water the plants. Each evening, I tap into the spiritual wellspring of meditation. Each day, I learn more about the flow of tea.

*I breathe in. I breathe out. I feel the sensation of my breath.*

I experience the flow of tea either as the served or the server, either with my tea brothers, Wu De and Kai Ya, or 'alone' with the tea, the teaware, the fire and the water.

In being served tea by Wu De and Kai Ya, I begin to experience the current of spiritual wisdom that flows through tea. This flow is particularly apparent in the movement of water through the course of the tea ceremony—from water jar to kettle to pot to bowls to bodies and beyond.

Water was heavily emphasized by the tea sages of yore, and for good reason. Without access to deep tea wisdom, many of today's tea drinkers wonder what these ancients were jabbering on about, but those initiated in the Way of Tea understand.

In observing the tea ceremony, the role of water as a teacher becomes clear. It transmits deep wisdom as it gradually shifts from room temperature liquid to vaporous steam, as it gathers and then transfers the energy of heat, and as it merges with and separates from the tea leaves, leaving both itself and the leaves changed as a result. Finally, transformed into tea, it becomes one with those who drink it, metamorphosing twofold yet again—transforming into a part of the drinker while transforming the drinker him/herself.

At each stage, the water reveals different truths. And once it has infused the tea leaves (and, for that matter, become infused with the tea leaves), it reveals deeper truths. This continues even in the moments in which flow appears to stop. For example, in the moments between the pouring of tea and the serving of tea. Although the steeped tea is contained in different bowls, it knows that it came from the same pot. As the steam rises, it doesn't care whose bowl it rose from. When a tea drinker recognizes this deeply, the ego dies a tiny, inconsequential death and the spirit is awakened to the power of life's flow.

*I breathe in. I breathe out. I feel the energy of my breath. I feel the flow which feeds my soul.*

Each day that I prepare bowl tea for myself (experiencing the role of server when I prepare it, and then, a few minutes later, experiencing the role of served), I come into contact with the flow of water in a more direct, instinctual way.

Before I remove it from its clay storage jar, I transmit a feeling to the water. Sometimes, I send it a question. Sometimes, I transmit gratitude for an answer. Sometimes, I reflect back to it a sense of what is. In return, water teaches me something new as it becomes a more integrated part of how I serve tea, a more appreciated part of my physical form and a more recognized part of my spiritual path.

Through feeling, I learn that water is the essence of the flow of energy. Like breath, water is a physical representation of the divine flow of the universe. Like a true master, water flows through all circumstances with ease and grace. Like an alchemist's gold, water is both the transformed and an agent for transformation.

But I also feel (on a spiritual and a physical level) that these words do not contain the wisdom of which I speak. In the realm of words, we often fumble with metaphors and similes to try to shine some light on deeper truths. In the silence and stillness of tea, words are not only inadequate, but entirely unnecessary—everything is understood through the realm of feeling and beyond it, in the realm of being.

*I breathe in. I breathe out. In between, there is but an instant. With each inhalation, I am born. With each exhalation, I die. In between, there is but an instant.*

The tea leaves my tea brothers and sisters here and elsewhere use to prepare tea were once nourished by the fire of the sun, the elements of the earth and the flow of rain and streams. Then, the energy of the fire, earth and water was preserved within the leaves, locked in place by simple drying, by the 'killing of the green,' by oxidation or even by fermentation.

When we serve tea, we reintroduce the energies that once nourished the tea leaves, but in new forms—the fire of the charcoal, the earth elements of teaware and the flow of spring water.



With the wisdom and flow behind well-served tea, the incredible energy captured within these leaves is liberated into the flow of life. The server and the served are elevated both in body and in spirit by the experience of partaking of the flow of energy that occurs when water and tea leaves are united yet again.

*This body breathes in. This body breathes out. I recognize that I am not the breather, but the energy, the flow, of the breath itself.*

When I serve tea, I feel the flow of the water from earthen water vessel to gourd ladle to iron kettle to clay teapot. I feel the water suffuse itself into the tealeaves to form something new—something that is both of it and of the leaves. When I am attuned to it, I can feel when the transformation is complete. It is something beyond words. This mind recognizes that fact. This body breathes in.

This body breathes out. Energy flows through it to pour the tea in unison with this exhale, and the tea flows into two bowls. When I am at one with it, I can feel that the tea is not something that I made. It is something that is me.

With this awareness, I begin to understand that my path is not one of learning (gathering wisdom for self-betterment), but one of transmitting (sharing wisdom for universal elevation). Gradually, with lessons from Wu De, fellow students, the tea spirit, water's flow and innumerable other sources, a transformation occurs. Slowly, with great patience and perseverance (from me and from my teachers), I become less like tea leaves (storage vessels for the spirit of tea) and more like liquid tea (a conduit for tea's wisdom and activated energy).

30 *The flow of my breath, myself, continues. That which I am is not limited to the confines of this body, but is an ever-flowing, ever-changing energy. To deny this flow is to deny life itself. To try to stop it is to try to extinguish the life of this body, this iteration of life's ongoing evolution.*

After hearing Wu De say it so many times, I finally understood his meaning. "As one on a spiritual path, true freedom is not doing what I want. It is doing what I must." The role of duty is becoming clearer. It is not, as the Western worldview might have us believe, a restriction of life. It is a weathering away of all that is superfluous and a channeling of life energy into one's true path. It is an abiding acceptance of one's duty.

I find that this shift in awareness and its implications in my life situation do not generate a sudden change within me, but one with immense power in its persistence. It is like gently flowing water that carves into rock over many years, forming a canyon that then serves as its riverbed. Duty is not an absence of choice because of any external force (which is, itself, an illusion), but because *your path has already been already illuminated for you through your own efforts.*

And although many things are not yet clear to me, they are becoming clearer as I carve my own way under the competent guidance of water, tea and my tea brothers here in Miaoli. Each day, I learn from water's flow and tea's spirit. Each day, I understand more deeply that these lessons are not mine to hold onto.

These are lessons not of the mind, but of the spirit. They have an alchemy of their own—one which transforms not only *me* but, eventually, *through me*. With this transformation, I change from one person with a singular identity to an interconnected source of tea wisdom in a long line of tea teachers, allowing the spirit of tea to flow through me in physical and mental action, and to shift the life of this physical form into a manifestation of the flow of tea. Like breath, this flow becomes not only a part of me, but it becomes the essence of my very existence.

*In this moment, I gain wisdom. In the next, I share wisdom. In between, there is but an instant.*





蓬萊山

真為物

