



# MEDITATION: PART I

Article by Nick Dilks

Over the next few issues I would like to offer some tips for bringing more of the spirit of meditation into our tea drinking. This could be particularly relevant for those solitary tea sessions, which we might savor from time to time. But it is also useful when drinking tea with friends: whether it's a quiet, mindful session with us at the Tea Sage Hut or even a more bawdy one resembling last orders at a bar! If we can remind ourselves of these tools, we will get so much more out of our *one encounter* with this tea. In this issue, I will talk about preparing the space: a key issue before we even begin to meditate. In later articles, I will explore tuning into the body, awareness of breath, loving kindness, Insight, and finally, a six elements meditation.

When setting up to sup from the 'Goddess best beloved! Delightful tea!', one can consider two extremes: over- and under-preparation. As the author of the quote above, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, put it: 'He who is best prepared can best serve his moment of inspiration.' And it's true: there really is something uplifting about sitting down in a beautiful, clean space that has been lovingly prepared. The mind delights in the *Chaxi* and the teaware and how they reflect the earlier mood that chose them; the small flower you picked yesterday evening as you strolled up the path sings of beauty in its delicate vase; the lovingly prepared pile of leaves on the bamboo scoop awaits the swirl of bubbling water from the kettle. The body too feels more alive and satisfied after stretching, sweeping the floor and tidying up a bit. The mind of course is more centered than it would have been, had we under-prepared and just tossed the session together in a hurry.

But, on the other hand, there is much truth in Napoleon's idea that 'over-preparation is the foe of inspiration(!)' If we start getting a bit O.C.D. about our tea space, the fun is soon sucked out of everything and our tea can veer towards yet another unpleasant chore on the ne'er diminishing tick-list. Of course, it is my personal ideal to always aspire to 'right' cleanliness. After all, one of the 'Eight Bowls of a Life of Tea' in our tradition is 'Cleanliness and Purity', both within and without. But it is also, I feel, important to recognize where we are. Some of us will have time constraints and others will be less drawn to this aspect of tea and may struggle with it. From monitoring my own attitude to clearing the space, it's easy to see that I am more of conqueror than a poet! However, experience has taught me that the surest way to fail is to force myself, so I just

keep the ideal in mind and express it as much as I am able. By focusing on the rewards of a lovingly set up tea session rather than berating myself for the times I'm a bit slapdash, I hope to coax—rather than beat—myself towards these ideals. All of us probably feel a bit tight for time during the week and it's natural to try to cut corners, but my sense is—as a novice tea drinker—that as tea rewards me for my efforts, the time and space to dwell in its company will keep magically increasing!

So, let's have a look now at how we can improve how we set up our tea space. The first thing to do is to set aside sufficient time to enjoy a mindful tea session. This involves leaving enough space to clear up our teaware properly at the end, lest our spacious reverie quickly descend into a jarring, agitated epilogue. As I live here in the tea community, I'm neither short of opportunities to drink tea nor the space to clean up calmly after. But for the past month now, I have been getting up very early to enjoy some tea on my own each day. We get up early enough here, so it has been a bit of a sacrifice but it can be done. Make sure the phone is switched off, and if you live with other people, let them know that you would appreciate some support with quiet, etc. Then, when you are ready, you can turn your attention to setting up the tea space. As with anything we are attempting to do well, I would really recommend learning to practice the Four Foundations of Mindfulness from the Buddha's teachings: that is mindfulness of body; feelings and emotions; mental states; and Reality. These can help us to arrive at the first sip in the right state of mind. The mind is really first and foremost in getting ready for a tea session.

What are these Four Foundations? And what is mindfulness? It never harms to go back to basics from time to time. Mindfulness, in my opinion, is the attempt to bring a fully inclusive awareness to what we are doing *right now*. From a certain point of view *we are awareness*. But, as Byron Katie says, 'We can forget this occasionally: that is 99.99% of the time!' And it's true. It's very easy for us humans, as Joyce puts it in *The Dubliners* to 'live a short distance away from [our] bodies'. We are also apt to get lost in our feelings and emotions, and walk around identifying with a negative mental state for hours: 'I am angry' etc., instead of holding that state in our awareness and trying not to act from it. We also tend to get lost in our thoughts, some of us to the extent that we live in a sort of virtual disassociated world in our heads and walk through life on just enough auto-pilot to avoid traffic accidents!



This is where the Four Foundations come in. Through consistently bringing our awareness from the thought-world back into the body, we become 'embodied'. There is actually much satisfaction and even pleasure to be gained from practicing the First Foundation. Sweeping a floor mindfully, for instance, can be a very pleasurable and sensuous experience: feeling the wood in your hands; the friction and release of the bristles on the floor as they make their sweeping motion; noticing the air on your skin; and the pressure and release on the soles of your feet as you walk along: all of this can be very pleasant by itself and will tend to bring the mind into the present moment, which normally means a reduction of agitated thoughts.

The Second Foundation is built on the first, and involves feelings and emotions. If we are not aware of our bodies, we are unlikely to really notice these. Emotions we probably know, but in a Buddhist sense 'feelings' refer to the hedonic tone of the moment: whether something is pleasant, painful or neutral. It is important to note this be-

cause generally, if something is pleasant we unconsciously crave more of it, and if something is unpleasant, we feel aversion to it. This is what sets off the emotional roller coaster of our responses to life and can actually limit us tremendously. For instance, if I had a bad experience of public speaking at school, when the next opportunity arises ten years later, the bad feelings that may co-arise will probably put me off trying again. To return to our discussion of setting up the tea space, if I have never enjoyed cleaning, the idea of sweeping the floor before I sit and sup will probably evoke a negative feeling. If I am unaware of this, then I won't want to sweep or set out a beautiful *Chaxi* or take the trouble to pick a beautiful flower. Conversely, if I am aware of this, I have a choice: I can stay within the narrow confines of my pain/pleasure limitations or become curious and... have a try! As I sweep, I may notice these unpleasant feelings strongly but now they do not take me over completely. So it is much less likely that I will fall into an unpleasant emotion, such

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as irritation, and become identified with it. Even more, as I bring awareness to bodily sensations, my experience might actually become pleasant. Either way, I am learning an important lesson in life: that I don't have to be limited by whether something is pleasant or unpleasant. I am learning to do the thing anyway with curiosity. This is the cornerstone of any path of transformation.

The Third Foundation involves bringing awareness to our thoughts and our mental states, such as restlessness, calmness, sleepiness or alertness, focus and distraction, and so on. Just like the emotions of the Second Foundation, if we are unaware, we can get lost in each mental state that arises and become that energy. This leads to an exhausting life as we are tossed around like driftwood on the stormy sea of the latest prevailing reaction. So, if we are tired while we are sweeping or our mind is full of resistant thoughts, we notice and surrender to these as we sweep. It's no reason to put the broom down. Besides, as the Fourth Foundation points out, everything is impermanent anyway. The chances are that the sleepiness and negativity will diminish perhaps as soon as the first bowl is imbibed after the preparation is done.

In the Fourth Foundation, we are noticing and reflecting upon the Buddha's teachings as we come into contact with the myriad experiences that the world offers us through our senses. We might notice for instance how we open ourselves up to suffering when we try to chase after pleasant experiences. It's also normally obvious that we suffer when we resist *what is*. As Byron Katie says, 'When I argue with Reality, I only lose 100% of the time!' There's lots more that could be said about this but that will suffice for now.

Now, back to our tea session: Hopefully, by now we have set aside some time to mindfully tidy up the tea space. We can then use our creativity to set up a *Chaxi* with some ornaments and chose the teaware to go with it (or vice versa). I was talking to Wu De the other day as we were looking at some tea sinks in Yingge, and he was saying that, though they can be beautiful, he prefers tea cloths because they tend to encourage more frequent changes. That is, it is easier to just leave the tea sink on the table all year round. Normally they are big and heavy, so they are more difficult to put away. And besides, the water just drains off anyway; a simple wipe with a towel would suffice for cleaning. By having a tea cloth, which will need to be washed more frequently, the tea table can become less of a fixed space. This is more in line with the reality of impermanence and the attitude of 'One encounter; one chance', which points to the uniqueness of each tea-session. As the *Chaxi* rotates, we can combine them with objects that suit the tea, our moods, and the plants available as the seasons rotate. By surrounding ourselves with ever-changing beauty, we increase the pleasure in our lives. Being creative or sitting amongst creative beauty has

been shown to boost the feel-good chemical, *serotonin*, in the brain. What more reason do you need?

Next comes tea selection. One of the things that I have been impressed with at the Tea Sage Hut is the thought and intuition that goes into selecting the tea. Before I came here, I would just 'have a bit of what I fancied'. But we needn't stop here. By doing a small amount of research and personal experimentation we can start to discover which teas suit different times of day, different seasons, and even different moods or health issues. In this way, we can begin to use tea less as a pick-me-up and more as a medicine in the sense of restoring balance. A nice Shou Puerh, for instance, might help us to balance the dampness and sleepiness we might feel on a cold winter's morning but might be far too heat-producing on a hot day. Don't believe the books; experiment for yourself! I actually drank a very 'hot' Shou Puerh recently on a boiling, humid day here in Taiwan and proceeded to sweat like a sumo for the next five hours. Lesson learned! Wu De also encourages us to 'talk to the tea' as we select it and sense which tea wants us to drink it right now. This might sound a bit whacky to some, and I certainly do not possess such Jedi powers yet, but I intuit what he is pointing towards. In the sense of meditation, I can stand by the teas and let my awareness turn inward as I ask the teas which one to drink. Along with my intellectual and experiential knowledge of which teas go well with hot or cold weather, or which teas are more yin or yang, I can pause in that embodied space and see what emerges. That's where I'm at anyway. I'll leave it to those who have gone further to talk from their experience.

And what about music? We can use the same process here as with tea selection. Don't just un-pause the i-Pod from its last outing. Tune in and see which music feels *right now*. What will go well with the tea you have just picked? What will balance your current mood? Or is it actually a day for silence? Again, go into the body and try to develop those Jedi powers. Turn off the rational computer and *Use the Force, Luke!* What music does the tea actually want to be drunk with? Notice if there is the tendency to avoid silent tea sessions. These are valuable too. Drinking tea is a good way of sort-of-doing-nothing. It is an excellent medium for being with uncomfortable emotions. There is something about the ritual and the warmth and the magic of tea that allows us to go further into this space than normal without getting overwhelmed, so *Steer to the deep!* and turn off the MP3s from time to time. I'll often sit down before I reach for the kettle and see if there are any issues that I need help resolving. I'm not advocating getting into a heavy inner-dialogue while you drink. Rather, notice what is there and acknowledge that it is an issue for you right now. Then let it go and trust in the tea. It's rather like dropping a pebble into a deep well. You can trust it will find its way to the bottom.

And finally, we can go and draw the water. For some of us, this will mean a trip to the sink or unscrewing a bottle of Evian. Not all of us are lucky enough to have an Yixing jar of fresh mountain water in our tea room. But how we approach our water can make a considerable difference to our tea. For a start, all water, even tap water benefits from sitting in a jar of nice clay for some time before we use it. If that jar is placed near some good vibes, like where we meditate, then all the better. This requires more preparation, of course, but it is really worth it. Like us, water thrives when it settles and mingles with boosting influences before the tea session begins. And besides, the best water will be at the top of a jar that has sat for a while, so we can draw it from there, if we give it sufficient time. We can also add some crystals to the jar or some old broken clay teapots, if their quality exceeds the clay of our jar. Again, we can use our Jedi powers; this time to infuse the water with love. At the Tea Sage Hut, we

sit with our hands on the Yixing pot and send our love and thanks into the water and ask it to perform whatever miracles each guest needs. As Eomoto has demonstrated, water crystals change into beautiful, shiny manifestations when they are infused with positive energy. So do we! This is why the positivity that we generate from mindfully preparing the tea space is so important.

So, let's pause until next time, kettle in hand. I will be back next month with some tips on the body, meditation and tea...

