



THE BEGINNER'S MIND

BY LINDSEY GOODWIN

Like good Zennies, we at the Tea Sage Hut often practice “Beginner’s Mind”. This means approaching everything (especially those things you think you “know already”) without preconceptions, and with an open, eager mindset. It is an understanding that you can never really understand, and a practice of approaching everything, everyone and every circumstance as though it is for the first time (because it surely is!). At the Hut, we are sometimes gifted with visitors who are very new to Tea, and who look on with great enthusiasm and the wisdom of a mind unburdened by answers.

As someone who spent years around tea before focusing on insight, I built up a lot of preconceived ideas about tea, so I find spending time with tea newbies to be especially instructive. From them, I can learn so much about approaching each tea session as the singular event that it is, and appreciating each tea deeply and fully for what it is (rather than what my mind has labeled it and reduced it to).

In January, one such guest arrived. Her name is Vera. In the weeks since she arrived, she has gone from a total tea novice to one who clearly sees the wisdom and beauty in tea, and from a total stranger to a dear tea sister—we get to know teas like people, slowly becoming great friends. About a month after her arrival, we sat down for a session with this month’s tea, the tea nugget brick.

Vera is an ideal companion for a “Beginner’s Mind” tea session such as this, and this month’s tea is also ideal for such a session. It’s similar to other *Shou* teas, and yet it’s different from your usual *Shou*. It’s also much less common than other *Shou* tea, so it’s easier to have a session without thinking you “know it already”. (Hint: You don’t! None of us do!)

And so we sat down one evening during the Chinese New Year break for some silence between the sporadic bristling of firecrackers in the night air, and some quietude found in the bottoms of our tea bowls. The kettle leisurely worked its way up to a rolling boil, and we (remembering that it is a holiday) restfully reclined on tatami, listening to the hiss of air rising through the water, and the hiss of rockets rising through the air.

We drank two bowls. Upon filling the side-handle pot a third time, the kettle was spent. I offered Vera a third bowl—doubly filled, mine empty—and went to fetch more water. When I returned, we broke silence to talk about the tea.

“So,” I asked, “what do you have to say about this tea?” And, oh, what her Beginner’s Mind had to share! She

spoke of the tea not as flavors and processing, or matter that you drink, but as feeling and experience and spirit. She said it was like being deep in a forest carpeted with rich, dense soil and sitting across from Mother Earth in human form. This vision of Mother Earth, she said, was voluptuous and dark and comprised of moss and wood and loam, yet also colorful and vibrant.

If ever I had a firm reminder of why drinking tea with only your mouth is not the way to go, this was it. I could kiss my “notes of old-growth forest” goodbye! Her description of drinking this tea was so filled with the wisdom of direct experience and so inspiring that it brought me back to my very first experience of drinking tea.

This memory is one of the most significant memories of my life, and I have told its story at least a hundred times. As with so many stories, the story and the actual memory can become two different things over time. But in honor of Beginner’s Mind, I decided to tell Vera the story as though telling it for the first time, from my actual memory of it rather than from any previous telling of it or preconceived idea of what it “meant”... and this Beginner’s Mind approach to storytelling ended up completely shifting my perspective on this formative event in my life and on my relationship with Tea.

I told Vera of my move to vegetarianism at age five, and how my parents were supportive, but at a bit of a loss about what to feed me at times. I told her about when my father took me out to dinner at a nice Chinese restaurant without my younger siblings, and how I felt like a such a grown-up sitting at the table with the starched tablecloth and the foods which seemed so exotic to me then. And I told her about how after the meal, the waiter brought out a pot of steaming hot tea with two heavy, white, handle-less cups.

My father poured the Puerh tea carefully into the cups, almost comically so, emphasizing to me that it was hot and that I needed to wait a few minutes before drinking it so I wouldn’t scald myself. He said that he had never drunk a tea like this before. He sniffed the steam. I did the same, trying to grip the rim of the cup without burning my fingertips. After some moments, he took a tentative sip and closed his eyes in a peaceful, almost dreamy, way. “It has the taste of the earth after the rain,” he said. I tilted my head and then smelled my cup again. I had never really thought about what things tasted like before. Food was always just food, and drinks were always just drinks. I took a tiny sip of the black liquor, and a



The author and Vera sharing tea

whole world opened up before me. Yes, the earth after the rain! Nature was there, in that teacup. The earth after the rain was there, in my sense memory, and perhaps in something cellular that lives in each of us before we even begin to form memories of our own. And it was there in those leaves steeping in the teapot. (After all, did they not grow out of the earth and rain?)

As I related this memory to Vera, I realized that in approaching it anew I had gained new insights from it. For years, I had been telling a story about an opening up of perception of *flavors*. But that's not what happened at all. "The taste of the earth after the rain" goes far beyond a flavor sensation. It is a connection to Nature. It is a connection to Life. It is a connection with Tea as a communicator of great wisdom and experience. And this is not only what my father had understood upon first drinking Puerh, but what I had understood so clearly as a child, before I had formed all kinds of ideas around what Tea is (supposedly) all about (but not really).

Inspired, I decided to make a firmer practice of drinking and serving tea with Beginner's Mind. Each time I pour, steep or sip, I will recognize that each tea session is distinct from all others, and even if I drink a tea in the morning, "the same tea" is a different tea that afternoon. Indeed, each bowl is different. Each sip is different. Each leaf is different. And each one holds a world of experience, and of wisdom. We just have to be ready to receive it with

an open mind, without any preconceived ideas about what it has to tell us.

This month, I challenge you (and myself!) to drink Global Tea Hut tea (and all teas!) with a Beginner's Mind. Forget about the tasting notes and the processing. Kiss your "creamy mouthfeel" goodbye! Instead, go into the full experience of the tea without any ideas of what it's all about. Who does it connect you to and where does it take you? What does it tell you of Nature and Beauty and Truth? What words of wisdom do its leaves whisper? Let go of what you think the answers will be and see what happens when you allow Tea to guide you!

