



DEPTHS & SURFACES

BY WU DE

With every sip, we're a part of something profoundly cosmic. The heritage of tea is ancient, older than civilization. It extends back beyond even the memory of the Chinese, which is perhaps oldest of all. Tea begins in the ages before a brush ever recorded a thought or deed—our unspoken beginnings. It begins with the archetypal shamans, weathered and cracked by winter's wisdom, passing on their ways to one apprentice at a time. It begins in our tribal days, the glory days, where a younger humanity roamed free across a much vaster earth, under very influential stars, and always with the Mystery whispering to him from over his shoulder. But you could also say that Tea starts before that—before people ever entered the great green kingdoms stretching out to the east beneath the Himalayas.

Though we owe innumerable bows to the Chinese culture that improved on tea production and preparation over millennia, handing it down to us, it's also important to remember that Tea is Nature. It doesn't belong to any of us. It belongs to the Earth. And the first shamans to use tea in their spiritual cultivation predate China, and even the arrival of the first Han people to the area that would later become "China"—a name derived from the first dynasty, "Qin". Tea doesn't care for our politics, or the imaginary boundaries we draw on our maps. She is older than map-making, and older than our measures of time. She's timeless. She has opened leafy crowns to summer skies and winter nights, new moons filling, and suns rising then setting beyond count. She has seen the rise and fall of empires, nestling roots deeper into the soil where such things don't matter. She holds, in Her wisdom, the nascent dawn of Man, and before that the quieter times when Her closest friends were the mice that helped Her propagate Her children-seeds.

Since the first shamans boiled tea leaves with hot stones, ladling the first draughts, myriad bowls have passed. Perhaps it seems like one long session to Tea, a single bowl filling and emptying like the moon, which whispers its own dappled legacy to Her each night. For us, things have changed, and not necessarily for the better. As people came into Tea, She also came into our world. She is, after all, in our bodies, our minds—influencing our aesthetics, our consciousness and decisions. And over time, She has been humanized—commoditized, exported, imported, fought over, traded and taxed. Though the commoditization of Tea is a new development for Her, it goes back 1500 or even 2000 years as we measure them.

It is easy for us to fall nostalgic for a time when all tea trees were wild, un-domesticated and part of the brewing was in the seeking out, finding and cultivating of one's own leaves. The number of us left who see Tea as a sacred bond with Nature has dwindled. (Though perhaps this Hut is the renaissance of that approach?) And like most things spiritual, the material harvest of our father's material seeds has begun, as we move into an age of Earth practice. Even a cursory survey of Tea related matters, on the Internet for example, is enough testimony to dishearten the most faithful Chajin.

I've recognized and celebrated Tea's ability to be both mundane and sacred, to create sessions that are deep and silent as well as fun with friends, casual conversation, and bonding over Tea. I wrote about it in my first book, *The Way of Tea*. But this has been a process for me, and an intellectual understanding isn't equal to *being* this truth. I still found myself favoring the sacred sessions. I still found turmoil in my heart with regard to the so-called "worldly" aspects of Tea. I longed for a hike through virgin forests to some wise, old tree that I could speak to, seeking an oracle in the leaves I would pick with my hands, dry and boil—feeling a deep bond between Heaven and Earth steeping in my heart. Then the Mystery would open its gateless gate to the ineffable...

These days, tea vendors speak of "de-mystifying" tea. I understand what they mean. They are responding to immoral and vague business practices, as well as misinformation in the marketplace, all of which makes choosing tea a complicated and confusing process for the consumer. Still, I've read such ideals and felt sad, yearning for the Mystery of Nature that surrounded tea sages of long ago.

More recently, I've begun to find a great and powerful lesson in the worldly aspects of Tea. It's easy to see the worldly aspects of Tea as a burden when you approach Tea as self-cultivation—from a more spiritual orientation—but the world of Tea can be as much a strength and asset as it is a challenge. I have not lost faith in the fact that in understanding Tea, I understand my place between Heaven and Earth, and ultimately find my Way. How could I? I live in a tea center. I see the spiritual healing and insight available through tea practice every day. And yet, I also must wade out into the market place to buy tea. I also drink tea with those who approach it differently than I do, usually as a beverage, hobby or a sensual pleasure. How do we engage with the material aspects of Tea? How do we compassionately participate in a movement towards tea production in harmony with

Nature? After all, we must include, rather than exclude, if we're to make a real difference.

These and many other questions have, over the years, forced me to confront my desire to take Tea off into the mountains alone. And I've become more and more grateful for the fact that my spiritual path, this Way of Tea, is one that forces me to participate in the world—to apply my spiritual insights. This has made me humbler, more compassionate and more authentic in both my Tea and spiritual practice. I honestly feel I am a better, more awake and loving person than I'd be if I lived hermetically with only my tea stove and the blue mountains to keep me company. That doesn't mean it's always easy, as I was recently reminded.

On a recent trip to Taipei, a friend and shop owner was feeling especially generous and took out some very rare, old Puerh tea to share with us. But after only five steepings, he dumped out the leaves and moved on to some other, less special tea. On the one hand, it's his tea and he shared it with us in the way he chose to. We should be grateful. On the other hand, we all felt disappointed. It was a like an unsolvable Zen koan: I don't want to feel like I am somehow better for having a spiritual approach to tea, as if our friend's approach is no good, but at the same time I don't want to approach tea like that either.

I'm still sipping on this problem, and haven't yet found my way through the confusion, but I am learning as I grow. Nevertheless, the insights I have had are still worth sharing, even at this stage: First and foremost, I've realized that there is indeed a delicate balance in the way I have to work with those who buy and sell tea, those who approach tea differently than I do. At the same time, I don't want to foster any disconnection. I want to be able to share tea with anyone who loves tea, in any way, and do so fluently and easily.

There is a deep, Daoist truth underlying this, I have realized: *The depths also contain the surface.* The depth of the lake does not fear the surface, it embraces it. It is the surface which fears the depth. Having a spiritual approach to Tea shouldn't mean one can't drink tea as a beverage, share in the hobby of tea or even revel in the sensuality of the Leaf. As time goes on, and I drink more tea, I realize that I can hold these seemingly contradictory terms in my heart: to wholeheartedly connect to Tea on a worldly level, while at the same time not approaching Tea that way in my own practice. That is Zen.

I want to be able to go to a tea market in the morning and drink tea with some merchants, chatting away about quality and tea processing, which tea is over-roasted, etc., and then head off to the monastery that same afternoon to share some deep and silent bowls of tea with the monks there, surrounded by those blue mountains. Maybe I'll then head off to a grannie's cottage that evening and share tea bags in mugs with her, as she prattles to me in a very endearing way about the good old days. In each of these approaches and experiences there is truth. The tea spirit shines in all of those sessions. And yet, as paradoxical as it perhaps may sound to you, if all three sessions

were scheduled at the same time, and I had to choose, I would most definitely be found at the monastery, resting in sacred space.

I am realizing with each session that my spiritual orientation towards tea is not at odds with the worldly aspects of tea at all. The new contracts I am writing are about going to the tea shop to drink tea with a friend in the business, promising that I won't ever (even internally) judge him or his tea, but rather sip the tea he is pouring—chatting about whatever he likes, enjoying the flavors and aromas, and being fully with the session as he is. At the same time, another clause in this contract—to continue the metaphor—is that one of the lessons I will carry away with me when I leave is that I don't want to prepare tea that way, and I don't want my guests to feel the way many of his do at the end. Even though that seems conceited, there doesn't necessarily have to be a drop of pride in it.

Simply put, I prepare tea ceremonially. I drink tea in sacred space. I hope to awaken harmony in my guests, and to shift their perspective towards Tea/Nature, themselves and each other. At the same time, I am happy to just enjoy a cup of tea, a chat and a bit of friendship with anyone, over any tea, brewed in any way. And I don't have to spend that time judging, or resting in ego—thinking I am somehow better for having a “deeper” approach. As I said earlier, the depths contain the surface. That doesn't mean that the depths are better or more desirable; it means that once you have swum down to the depths you realize that it is all one lake. Or maybe I am just the kind of fish that swims deeper down, and though I'm able to have a tour of the lighter waters above, basking in the mottled sun, I always return to my usual haunts below.

There is so much of the worldly aspects of tea that I will spend a lifetime working with, like promoting sustainable, environmentally responsible tea production for example. And as I drink more tea, I've learned to be enthusiastic to face these challenges. I've learned that having a practice rooted in the material world, with all its foibles, is a good thing—one that forces me to grow in ways I wouldn't otherwise. And another thing, I'm finding, is that this is perhaps not the time for retreat into those blue mountains, not when the environment there is so threatened. Now is the time to get involved, to reach out and connect to people you find it difficult to connect to, and even to love them. In seeing how they approach tea, and finding that in myself, it's actually easy to find a common ground in our mutual adoration for the Leaf.

Past all the recent celebration for the engaging, though sometimes challenging, worldly aspects of tea, I still gravitate towards concluding these thoughts with a return to what's beyond all that human garble: *Tea is a leaf. Tea is Nature. She doesn't belong to us. We belong to Her.*

