

THERE IS ALWAYS A BOWL WAITING HERE

Max Raphael

We offer Tea to the altars at just about every session. In part, this is to celebrate aspects of our tradition and honor wisdom, compassion or other Divinity. But there is another reason we do this as well...

Tea is connection. This bowl of tea, held in my two hands, connects me internally and externally. My senses awakened, my attention drawn inward, I gain permission to slow down and find my center. All the same, I can simply glance up from this stillness and see a brother or sister across the tea table, to whom I am also connected. After we finish this bowl and before the next one is poured, all our bowls come back together to receive the tea as one bowl. As a resident student at this tea center, it is a true gift to meet so many of you who travel to our center, and share so simply and deeply through this tea tradition. However, if you have not made it to our center, you may like to know that you are still a part of our life of Tea. Our hearts open to you again and again in a very real way. When we say we raise our bowls or cups to you wherever you are, we truly mean it!

Every day or two at our tea center, we take a pause during our tea session to brew some tea not for ourselves, but as symbolic offerings to both within and beyond our-

selves; to our own Divinity we wish to make space for, and to each of you, our community of Tea brothers and sisters across the world. It is a beautiful ritual that arises from our daily tea sessions. After a few bowls are shared in silence, the brewer places a special tea cloth on the table, used specifically for this ceremony. At this moment, the students rise from the tea table to gather the cups that sit at each altar. After they are carefully rinsed and cleaned, the cups are placed upon the tea cloth in a circle, and a fresh steaming pot of tea is poured into them. With dedication, intention and care, each cup is taken, one by one, and placed back on its altar as an offering.

These altars are dedicated to various deities or aspects of Divinity, relevant to our practice of Tea and Zen. These figures include the Buddha in our meditation room and Kuanyin, who watches over our tea sessions in the main tea hall; *Milafa* (Laughing Buddha) brightening our Gongfu tea room, and Tea legend Shen Nong in our main hallway, inviting us to feel rooted in Great Nature. Upon each of these

altars rests a unique teacup, along with the traditional offerings of fresh flowers and fruit, incense, and light. The presence of these altars is not a sign of any religious affiliation here at our center—after all, there are deities from many different spiritual traditions watching over each space. Instead, their role in our daily life here is more universal and accessible. They are vehicles through which we continually cultivate humility, presence and gratitude. Bowing before the Buddha, I bow to the stillness and awakening in me. In offering this cup of tea not to myself, or even another person in the room, its potential becomes infinite. Its expression can reach far beyond this tea space, as far as my mind will allow. And while maintaining the beauty, purity and cleanliness of these altars has its own significance with respect to our internal practice of Cha Dao, the ceremony of offering tea to them also carries another intention—an act that welcomes each and every one of you into our hearts on a continual basis.



You may have read these words in previous issues: “at our center there is always a cup of tea waiting for you”. This is not simply a symbolic gesture or saying, but a living expression. In the true spirit of Tea, we commit to continually opening ourselves; opening our doors, our home, and our hearts to let others in. The life and breath of this center is not found in any abundance of tea on the shelves, or teaware in the cabinets; it is lived through our sharing of each moment together, and in giving of ourselves to others. This tea, this bowl, are mere material things without someone to share them with.

I place this cup on the altar before Buddha or Kuanyin, but I also set it out for you. These cups, which are not yet drunk, signify that a cup of tea is always waiting for everyone still on their way to visit us here. Whether we are joined by just one beautiful being at the tea table or several wonderful guests, we remind ourselves that, beyond these walls, our family is ever more vast than we can see in any given moment. This is easy to remember once a month, when addressing hundreds of envelopes to carry this magazine across the world. But we remember our connection with you throughout the month as well, seeing you reflected in the cup of tea that warms our hands and our hearts. Each week, we receive the gift of meeting more and more of you as you make it here to our center and share in this community. It is a unique joy to live our days together in the spirit of Tea, and I hope you are able to welcome this experience more and more, wherever you are. This cup of tea I place on the altar is dedicated to awakening my higher self, my own Buddha nature... But it is also to prepare for your coming here, whenever that day might come.

Whether you are planning to come here in the near future, or haven't thought the least of it; whether you reside in the Americas,

Europe, Australia, or Asia—you are every bit as connected here at our tea table as you can imagine. The presence of this magazine and its continual growth are evidence of this connection—and surely, if you have visited us here, you might not have imagined two years earlier that you would find yourself at a tea center in Taiwan!

This cup that won't be drunk transcends the physical, and becomes an offering made purely of intention. From there, it is only our imagination that will define its reach

in time and space! Just as we pause and place our hands on the Global Tea Hut envelopes of those we know, sending love and *metta* before they are sent out, we close our eyes and invite each of you into our minds and hearts, as we put forth this cup of tea. Of course, we don't want you to arrive and drink *this* cup from the altar! But this practice is very real inside us, connecting us each time to the true essence behind a life of tea, which is ultimately of sharing ourselves, our own awaken-



ing and wisdom, and holding space for others.

Without believing in some sort of 'magic' behind this ceremony, there is an obvious energy you can feel when seeing a gathering of steaming cups on the table that no one in the room will drink. For me, it is a physical reminder that the tea we brew is not *our* tea. This center, which indeed we call home, is not only *our* home. It is always open to you, as are our hearts. Joined together by the Leaf, we are ever warmed with gratitude for each and

every opportunity to share our lives together. Until we do so in person, know that I raise this cup of tea to you...



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