



# WATER

## THE MOTHER OF TEA

-Wu De

*And so we begin our exploration of water as an element in the alchemy of tea. There is no simpler, more affordable way to improve your tea than better water. It is, after all, most of what's in the bowl. But there is more in water than just better tea. There are also metaphors for living skillfully, appreciation for the source of all life on this planet, as well as a need to address the effects our civilization is having on water.*

**T**here is no easier, simpler way to improve your tea or your life than water. Water is the medium of Tea, as it is the medium of life. Since ancient times it has been known as the “Mother of Tea”. Like Tea, water is incredibly sensitive, taking the shape of whatever container it is placed in, adapting and flowing with the contours of the land, and consequently it has always been a tremendously important Daoist symbol. In fact, the Dao itself is often called the “Watercourse Way.” Water always finds the easiest route, flowing through, under, over or around obstacles effortlessly. It also always seeks the lowest place, teaching us the power of humility. When we put ourselves beneath the lessons we wish to learn, they flow into us.

The ancient fascination with water, especially by Tea mystics, hasn't gone from the world. The Japanese water magician, Masaru Emoto, published his seminal work, *Hidden Messages in Water* changing forever the way we heal with water. In his experiments, he photographs water crystals that are flash-frozen. He compares crystals from healing springs and polluted waters, as well as the differences between water that was exposed to love and joy versus that exposed to hatred; and water exposed to sounds, words and music as well. The positive waters form crystals that are beautiful and symmetrical, whereas the negative crystals are discordant and ugly. Half the earth is water; and the human body itself is 50 to 70% water. It is easy to

see why Chajin have always sought out magical waters to compliment their tea, and how more attention to the water you drink, and the energy structure of it, is a healing shift.

There is an old Chinese saying that a great tea is ruined by poor water, but an average tea can be made great with special water. It's a shame that we have deprived ourselves of the great variety of water that was once available to tea lovers. In ancient times, water was divided into Heaven and Earth, and they tried many kinds of water with certain teas: water from snow or rain, and even snow melted from certain locations or times, like the first snow to gather on the lower branches of a plum tree. And from the Earth, they took water from certain springs



and streams, or even rivulets in the center of great rivers, like the famed “Tiger’s Eye” that once rotated in the center of the Yellow River and was renowned for its ability to enhance a certain kind of green tea. Tea sages carried magical waters in gourds, stored them in stone urns and went to amazing lengths to fulfill the alchemy of Tea.

I sometimes imagine myself by some ancient spring, brewing up the Elixir of Life with its crystal waters; or inside a hut melting snow from the highest peaks to steep my old-growth puerh from the lowest jungles—bringing Sky and Earth together through my human efforts. Such poetic visions transport me to other times more akin to the magical spirit of Tea. Perhaps it was a

puerh that told me tales of its past, reminding us both of a cleaner, brighter Earth that could be again, if we but change our ways...

### Source

The source of your water is paramount. Since Sky/Heaven water is pretty much out of the question, we are left to find healing Earth waters. There may still be some places where snow or rain could be used for tea. If you find yourself in such a place, be sure to experiment, and raise a cup for us all. For the rest of us, though, water is mostly going to be about finding good Earthly sources. And could there be a more poignant symptom of the modern sickness

than the fact that we have no more water and can’t even drink that which falls from the sky? Imagine if you set up a stall two hundred years ago trying to sell bottled water—you’d be thought mad! Even my grandfather’s generation thought the switch to bottled water was insane. And considering that we *are* water, its sickness *is* our sickness.

Traditionally, Earth water was divided into: spring, stream and well. And they were generally ranked in that order qualitatively. However, relying too much on Ming Dynasty water notes betrays the true spirit of Tea, which is experiential and present. The world has moved on. It is interesting to read about the water/tea combinations of past ages, but we must focus on the tea

in front of us, and how to improve it. All the books and scholarly notes, translations and definitions won't make a better cup of tea. In fact, they can sometimes get in the way. It is nice to fly on the poetic visions of Tang Dynasty tea, but applying the water wisdom of that age to this one is foolish, and unrealistic. They had different tea, different water and a very different alchemy than we do. Nowadays, there are definitely wells that are better than springs, and springs that are better than wells. Perhaps even back then there were such exceptions. It's hard to say without drinking their tea. In general it's also dangerous to think that all X's are better than all Y's, as Nature always provides plenty of exceptions. It is not as if the old tea masters compared every single well to every single spring. I don't think this was their point anyway; rather, they were suggesting that in general spring water is better than well water because of the minerals, altitude and the fact that the water flows a bit, and that movement is important. Still, this is a generalization, not a law. Without experiential wisdom, all the quoting won't improve your water or tea.

There are some general principals we can use to navigate our exploration for good water. For example, it is always better if you can gather water yourself from Nature, rather than buying it in a bottle. The act of fetching water puts a bit of your energy into your tea. It makes it real, and demands respect. Every week we hike into the mountains to gather the week's water for the center. This ritual is transcendent, and the tea on that day is always some of the best, lit up with the morning's stroll through the mountains and the love for our favorite water. Guests are always able to taste the difference drinking such tea with fresh spring water.

Walking up those stairs this last decade has changed more than just my water for tea; it has also transformed me. In the end, making a



commitment to gather water once a week is also making a promise to hike in Nature once a week. And a good hike is healthy in its own way. One day, as I was midway up those stairs, I realized just how much this trip had affected me, my outlook and my way of being.

If you are unable to gather water from Nature, try to put a bit of your energy into the act of getting water in other ways. You could walk to the store rather than driving, for example—filling your water with intention and power, rather than viewing it as a means to an end. We should learn to respect our water as much as we respect Tea, and feel grateful

for the role it plays as medium to our medicine. In the end, the water is the greater portion of the medicine anyway.

Pay attention to the differences in your water. Don't just read that spring water is better than well water. Instead, gather water from a well and, if possible, from a spring and then taste them side by side. Use them for different teas. The best water for one kind of tea may not necessarily be the best for another. The tea mystics of the dynasties were out experimenting with different water and tea combinations, so why should we do any less? Sure, we have less variety to choose from, but



that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to find the best of what is available to us.

In general, waters that move a bit are ideal, but you don't want water that is crashing, expending its Qi. The water should not be too still either. It is also helpful if there are some minerals in the water—too little and it will seem flat, too much and it will be heavy and cloudy, leaving residue behind on your teaware and a flavor in your tea. Also, pay attention to the differences between water drawn at different times of day. There is an amazing quality to dawn water, as it is full of the Yang energy of an awakening

world. It is deeper and richer than water from the same spring gathered in the afternoon or evening.

When tasting different waters, we look for water that is smooth and rich. Pay attention to texture in your mouth. Roll it around, without slurping or aerating it. Good water feels silky and smooth, as if the atoms are together and aligned. After you swallow, is there a pinch in your throat? No? Well, good water slides down comfortably. It also coats your mouth and throat, lingering for a long time. How long can you feel the water throughout your mouth after you have swallowed it? Great water also quenches

your thirst deeply. After hiking up the many hundreds of steps on a hot morning, we are often sweating and thirsty. Even a single, small metal cup of this spring water completely quenches the thirst and penetrates deeply into every part of the body. To really test a water, try it with a tea that you are incredibly familiar with. In this way, you will surely find a water that is ideal for you.

### ***Storage***

The second way to improve our water and tea is storage. This is yet another way to develop respect for

Tea, further ingraining it into our life, as we begin to live a life of Tea. Tea fills us and permeates our lives. It becomes a part of all that we do in this way.

Your water storage jar need not be anything fancy, just a simple glazed urn. If you are unsure about the quality, use something glazed. Unglazed clay can really influence the water dramatically.

Water should be stored similarly to tea, away from sunlight and in a place where the temperature stays cool and constant. This is why plastic bottles are not ideal. Plastic is an unstable molecule and therefore breaks down into the water. It also allows light to enter, causing temperature fluctuations throughout the day. Storing your water in a jar will greatly improve the quality of your tea.

Always scoop from the top with a pitcher or *hishaku* (ladle). When water is still, the lightest water rises to the top. That water is ideal for tea, with more Qi and breadth. We often give the very bottom water to the plants at the center. Try putting water in a pitcher to rest and then drink from the top, middle and bottom. I think you'll be able to tell the difference.

Try to honor and respect your water the way you do Tea, as medicine. As we mentioned earlier, Mr. Emoto in Japan did experiments photographing water crystals exposed to prayers and emotions, as well as music. Every time we fill a kettle of water at the center, we first pause before the urn and put some loving-kindness (*metta*) into it. We all know that our mother's food is better than the food at a restaurant, because of the love she puts into it. Why should water be any different? In fact, water is even more sensitive than food. Fill your water with gratitude. This water will become 50 to 70% of your body after you drink it. It sustains you and gives you life. Ask it to fulfill and bring out the best in your tea. Introduce it

to your tea, inviting it to come and enhance your session. You will soon see a difference in your tea and life by respecting water in this way.

### ***The Mother of All Life***

Water is half our Earth. It is so intimately connected to this life we live. It is not just a part of us, but *is us*—fundamentally. Honor and respect water, not just as the Mother of Tea, but also as the flow of your life, from rain and sky to mountains and ocean. Change flows like water. Water moves the way the Dao does, and so we can learn about Infinity watching from the bank of a river.

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Our tea is dry, unmoving and brittle leaves. It is the water and heat that awaken it and bring it to life. The water begins the flow of a tea session. Use the time while your water boils the way all the tea sages, past and present, have used such time: for meditation and contemplation. Wait for the “wind to sough the pines”, which is what they called the sound the boiling kettle makes, signaling the beginning of Tea's movement.

This very water we drink has traveled through millions of other human bodies, and we now find ourselves drinking Genghis Khan, as well as all the Tea sages that have ever been. Drink of the amazing spring water, for it is still here on

this Earth, in you and I. Water flows through these global cycles—Sky and Earth, rain and river—to our very kettles, then through our pots and into us. As this stream of water flows by our tea, do you notice how effortlessly these leaves join its currents? The tea so naturally falls into the stream of hot water, going with its flow on its way to us. We should also live like this. We should also make tea like this, so that we too are just another eddy in the stream.

Rikyu often said, “Imagine your life without tea and if it is any different, you have yet to understand tea.” This deep Zen wisdom is about recognizing that Tea is a voice of Spirit and Nature. We shouldn't be distracted by the form. Tea is not a substance; it is a heart. There is no better way to actualize that wisdom than drinking just hot water. My master asked us to brew only water for three months and three days. He often said that when you can serve hot water to guests and they feel as if they have drunk tea, you will know mastery is near. “If you can't drink and understand water, you can't advance in gongfu tea,” Master Lin often says. By just drinking water, we learn to recognize that water does actually have structure, and the influences affect that structure in ways that benefit tea preparation—both in the mouthfeel and in the way the tea is taken into our beings.

This month, try having a session, alone or with friends, drinking only water. Use a pot or just bowls, or even gongfu, doing everything you would ordinarily, only without the tea leaves. In this way, you will develop a greater respect for just how much water works in and through all the tea you prepare.



