



FETCHING SACRED WATERS

-Shen Su

There is a saying in our tradition that "Behind every tea master is a cha tong (tea servant)." This has two meanings: The obvious one is that the master cannot prepare tea for guests without an assistant(s) to help with the water. The second important meaning of this old saying is that the master was once herself a cha tong, serving as an apprentice to her own master. You can learn a lot fetching water for tea.

The last drop glides off the silver-tipped spout and fills the side handle teapot. The iron kettle stands empty. Steam is rising, tea infusing, fire-bound coals basking in the brazier. In the Main Tea Hall, sunset orange themes the decor: quiet, dim, and gentle on the eyes. Purple tea, our Evening Sky; jarred tea: our sacred sand; steeping tea: our ebbing and flowing ocean. It's late morning. We sit around the table in silent repose. Silent as we sleep, as we meditate, as we drink tea. Outside, the city bombs with noise, but we make room for the space in which no sound exists. Shoulders draw down, gently, hands join near the *hara*, and eyelids glide slowly like silk over polished marble. The faintest smile, often visibly without, wets

our lips. If it's fine tea—and it is—sweetness sails back on our breath, after first coating the mouth, then effortlessly rolling down the back of the throat like morning dew down a curved blade of spring grass. Awareness increases. The breath becomes more noticeable. The air is still and through that stillness the iron kettle gestures in my direction. A simple exchange is made. Bowl tea is set before each guest and it's time for me to fetch water...

Wherever I go, there I am: from the Main Tea Hall to the Zen Temple—two great traditions manifest in adjacent rooms. The distance is short but the energy shift is great as soon as I pass from room to room, a movement marked by the gentle sound of tinkling beads that drape

the doorway. The beaded curtain sways like a heavy cape in my careful wake. The path before me now: an arching mosaic of simple wooden steps embedded in a sea of white rocks. I step dutifully onto the wooden path leading to the meditation hall. I hold the iron kettle in my left hand as I touch foot onto tatami mats. The room is clean and shaded, refined and simple. Here, in this spiritual chamber, this place of purity, this sanctity, a few major players reside: First and foremost, Lord Buddha on the altar, always providing us the opportunity to take refuge in and bow to our Higher Self. And in the opposite corner, we find our water, stored in the womb of an Yixing, purple-sand jar. Inside, there's a reef of crystals,



charcoal, a broken teapot and other water-enhancing materials. By its side I kneel, moving with the center of my body. I relax the kettle from my hand. I clasp both hands on the bosom of the jar, close my eyes, and breathe...

We meditate here. We take a seated position, close our eyes, and observe the breath. We sit for the sake of sitting and we vow to attain the unattainable. We generate a particular energy. A blend of frequencies akin to love, gratitude, perseverance, determination, forgiveness, harmony, grace, friendship, liberation, peace, happiness and warming embrace to name but a few of the ingredients that flavor this hall. And who (or what rather) can taste that medley of peaceful vibrations

which permeates this space if not the receptive medium of water?

Immediately, I thank the water. Hands still clasping the urn, through the pores I pour my heart. Sometimes I feel an ocean delicately nudging the inside walls of the jar. Other times, a placid pond in a wild forest. I might sit there for ten or twenty seconds before making a request, often for nothing more than love and gratitude at the tea table. What I request of the water is often dependant on the texture of the tea session. In the way that tea, teaware, and hanging scrolls complement the seasons, my prayers to the water complement the session as well.

Unsure as to why, the next action is my favorite. A ladle hangs from the wall above the clay vessel.

Its handle is cut of bamboo, nodes roughly spaced every half inch; its head is a gourd the shape of an exaggerated pear; its belly is coarsely shattered revealing the womb in which the water will enter. This ladle hangs not from some simple hook, but from a jagged curving branch jutting out from the wall. I love reaching up towards the ladle the way plants grow towards the light, slowly and earnestly, avoiding all obstacles. With single-mindedness, I release the ladle from its branch perch and rest it by my side. I hear tea being drunk back at the table. Bowls being lifted, bowls being lowered...

I remove the lids, first from the clay jar and then from the iron kettle. Everything is open. Steam rises.



Raising the kettle, the ladle, and my body in unison, I begin to draw water. The water in the jar is calm and quiet and I intend to keep it that way. It's not so much me drawing the water as it is the water filling the empty space of the gourd. I simply guide the gourd, holding its handle like a long brush. Ever so carefully, so as not to spill a droplet, the empty kettle and the full gourd unite. With each ladle, water takes on the interior shape of the iron kettle; water laden with gratitude, pure reflective consciousness and imbued with loving-kindness. At the correct angle, with just the right pouring motion, I draw and ladle... draw

and ladle... Once appropriately full, I carefully return the ladle to its abode, fasten the lid back on the jar, cap the kettle and rise from my kneeled position.

It's a celebratory ritual: a deep reverence, a slow dance and an honor. It's one of the few things I can honestly say I perform without trying to speed up or make more efficient. If ever I draw slightly faster, *gulp* and *drip* are the indicative sounds pointing to my state of mind. If ever I ladle apace, spilt water wets the outside of the kettle. If ever I lack presence, uncertainty stains my movements. But when I regulate speed and employ patience,

there is no sound, no trace. When I am present, I become *fetching water*. In those moments, I learn about myself and I learn to love.

Exiting the room, kettle in hand, I walk the wooden path and wade through the beaded curtain once again. A simple exchange is made and I rejoin the rhythm of the tea ceremony. All that I can do for the water has been done—until the next kettle empties. Like a calligraphic *Enso*, the circle is never complete, always starting again. From here, the water will go through countless other influences until reaching our guests in the form of tea. What traces remain from the process of



Fetching water from the purple-sand (zisha) water urn in the Zen Temple of the center. Wu De always says this urn and what's in it are the center's greatest treasures, and should be treated with according reverence.



fetching can only be experienced by each individual in each individual brew.

Even if this reverence towards water is just poetic, there's something special about it that changes people. Moreover, if I myself have become more grateful and loving as a result of fetching water, that will have an affect on everyone in the tearoom. Whether my consciousness changes the water or not doesn't really matter; through it all I am changing myself in a way that benefits my growth.

