

**Z**en is no ordinary religion. It has no prevalent dogma, rites or rituals; there isn't even any coherent soteriology—Zen is an experience! And throughout the ages, masters have used a wide variety of techniques to help instill that certain sensation in students: a recognition of the fact that the so-called “self” is an illusory construct of social programming and of rational, as well as linear, linguistic thinking. This experience cannot, however, be easily described or conveyed in words, concepts or ideas; it must be lived through. As a result, many of the methods used to catalyze this awakening were also non-verbal; and all too often even when they taught in words, the teachers of old used illogical nonsense meant to show the practitioner the absurdity of trying to achieve a linguistic Zen. More often, the transmission happened quietly and subtly, and

wasn't recorded in books or treatises, occurring instead within the realm of personal experience—the space between master and students. And in imagining these ancient gardens, monasteries and forests where intuition was passed on from master to pupil, we invariably find steaming bowls of tea nearby; for since ancient times, Eastern mystics have utilized tea to transmit understanding. After all, what could be more substantial and experiential, as well as symbolic and philosophically profound, than the master brewing his mind into a cup that is passed steaming to the student, who then consumes and absorbs it, physically and spiritually, literally and metaphorically?

They say that the flavor of Zen and the flavor of tea are the same, and without an understanding of one, there is no mastery of the other. The affinity between tea and Buddhism, especially *Chan* (Zen), is a friendship dating back more than

a thousand years. In the beginning, tea was an aspect of spiritual well-being and healing, used first by aboriginal shamans and then later by Daoist mendicants. Learning from these Daoist sages, the early Buddhist monks would also come to adopt the Way of Tea as an important aspect of their tradition. They would then be the first ones to domesticate tea, and also develop much of the aesthetics, pottery and brewing methods that would mature into the artistic appreciation of tea by royalty and literati. All of the famous tea mountains in China also have Buddhist monasteries on them, and this is no coincidence: sometimes the monks or nuns were drawn by the wizened tea trees that grew wild there, while at other times they brought the tea with them.

When tea was eventually brought to Japan by monks who had traveled to the Mainland to study Zen from the masters there, it would also

## AN INTRODUCTION TO ZEN & TEA TASTING THE ONE FLAVOR



