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# DAILY MEDITATION & TEA PRACTICE

-Rich Allum

*Earlier in this issue, Wu De spoke about how tea is a bridge between Zen and Tea that leads both from the profane to the sacred and the other way as well. Rich decided to do this experiment to journal what would happen as he drank tea and then meditated, versus meditation and then tea drinking. While there may not be a decisiveness to this approach, his daily journal chronicles a life of tea and Zen worth reading. He shares in his experience, challenges and difficulties, as well as his insights and hope.*

**W**hilst staying at the Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan I was talking with Wu De about my desire to begin writing again. Other than the occasional haiku, I haven't written much of anything since my school days, despite having a desire to. Quite simply, I had no subject to write about or any reason to write about it! Wu De then suggested that I could conduct an experiment involving tea and meditation and write about that, as there are many readers of Global Tea Hut magazine out there who are just as inexperienced in these matters as I am, and may be interested to hear the views of a like-minded person. The experiment was to see what the difference between meditating and then drinking tea or drinking tea and then meditating had on one's morning practice and day in general.

I decided that I would dedicate an hour each morning for two weeks to this experiment: half an hour in meditation and half an hour drinking tea with mindful awareness, swapping the order after one week. As they are both daily activities for me, I immediately saw the bene-

fits of doing such an experiment. I felt that the best time to conduct this practice was first thing in the morning, with the hope that in the years to come I'd be able to extend this practice of experiential analysis and then habit reformation into the rest of my life. Sharing this personal journal of my experience will hopefully be useful to others with a tea and meditation practice.

## Day 1

Since it was the first day, my mind was distracted with the myriad of things I thought I needed to pay attention to and look out for, to notice and to write down. It took what felt like a lifetime for my mind to be calm enough to even consider myself meditating. As usual, the thoughts of last night's TV shows, the work schedule for the day ahead and the coming weeks' jobs to be done periodically filled my head, coming and going like waves of distraction lapping at the shore of my mind. Then I noticed a recurring idea: "It would have been better to

drink tea first." I told myself, "I can't concentrate, this isn't working!" I do usually drink tea prior to meditation in the morning, so on reflection my reaction made sense. In that moment, I was shocked at having seen the fixed view I had gained from a mere six to eight months of conditioning. Also, I had meditated without the aid of tea for over two years beforehand, so my craving for a specific order to things was certainly surprising. The tea session that followed my meditation was a contemplative one: "How often do I behave out of conditioning and in what circumstances?" I wondered, already knowing the answers. The tea itself, though, was a disappointment. There was no magic, no connection and, on a sensory level, no enjoyment, although it was a tea that I love! I vowed to try again tomorrow with a beginner's mind.

## Day 2

I think my whole being needed to meditate today. No sooner had I sat on my cushion



and straightened my back than my whole body relaxed—my mind quieted down and my concentration deepened. Throughout the session many thoughts appeared as always, but today they merely came and went. I clung to none of them. Needless to say, my tea session afterwards was a complete contrast to that of yesterday. Everything about it seemed different, seemed deeper. The steam coming from my bowl danced before me in a way I've never noticed before, the liquor was a beautiful gold, shimmering in the morning sunlight. The mouthfeel was exquisite, and I noticed how easily the tea passed down my throat, warming me from the core. I ended the session with a strong feeling of quiet contentment, ready for the day ahead and feeling much more open to meditating before tea!

### Day 3

I woke up tired and yet the prospect of meditating didn't seem off-putting. I sat on my cushion and spent half an hour sitting without too much distraction. When it came to drinking tea, I wasn't expecting a repeat of yesterday's heightened awareness, making the assumption that an uneventful meditation would lead to an uneventful tea session. On the surface I was right; my senses didn't detect anything extraordinary in the bowl or my surroundings. However, my internal experience surprised me! I'm far too inexperienced to talk of Qi, and I'm not even sure I could describe what it feels like as it moves within us, but I definitely experienced something today that I hadn't felt before. As I drank the first bowl my attention was drawn inwards, to a feeling that was radiating from my core upwards towards my head. I felt more alert and energized, but calm—it wasn't like the adrenaline kick of too much caffeine or sugar; it was more subtle...

### Day 4

My meditation felt short today. Perhaps it was because I felt particularly absorbed. I attended a meditation workshop last night that focused on working with sensations within the body, from the gross to the subtle. These sensations were the focus of this morning's session. When the time came for tea I was still very centered, calm and alert, and the difference it made to my tea experience was quite apparent. As soon as I lifted my bowl, I could feel the heat and energy through my hands and arms, much like the day before but much more intensely. I don't mean simply that the bowl was hot; it felt like I could feel the vibration of the heat transferring from the bowl and then through my body. I took a sip and again I could feel that energy as it moved down my throat. I was also amazed at the taste of the tea! Although I love the purple-red tea that I was drinking, it had never tasted like this before. There was an amazing sweetness to it and a depth of flavor that lingered for minutes after each bowl (*bui gan?*). I've read that this returning on the breath is a sign of a good tea, but it had never been so noticeable to me before. I finished my session with an overwhelming feeling of peace and contentment.

### Day 5

My meditation this morning was full of distractions. All manner of thoughts, coupled with a monstrous feeling of hunger, made concentration very difficult indeed. I'm sure we're all aware that hunger has a huge impact on our mental well-being, and this morning was testament to that fact. I couldn't settle or concentrate and found myself becoming quite vexed until the sound of my kettle snapped me out of my negative spiral. As I touched the handle, I remembered Wu De's golden rule from a previous issue:

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“Never ever (times ten!) pick up the kettle until your heart is still!” And just like that, I was transported from my negative space into the present moment. I waited a minute or two until I was sure and then poured. Unlike most days this week, today it was the turn of Tea, and perhaps more importantly the ritual of brewing, as I am learning to practice it, that calmed and centered me. Today, tea *was* the meditation, rather than merely an activity for after meditation. As I finished my tea session, I found myself thinking of a quote from Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: “Not two, not one. This is the most important teaching. Not two and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one.” Although I know he was not talking about tea and meditation when he said this, I couldn't help but feel it was relevant to me at the time...



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### Day 6

I returned to my bodily experience today, concentrating my mind on my *hara* during meditation and on into my tea session afterwards. I noticed something strange: by keeping my mind on my body experience and less on my physical actions during tea, my movements became more fluid. I felt a union between my left and right sides, like everything worked well together. I also felt a sense of harmony. I believe that most of the time my brain is too engaged in what I'm doing, as I try desperately to control every aspect of any given moment. The idea of "*Mushin no shin (the mind without mind)*," is certainly not a new concept to me, and you may have heard this as well. But, like me, you will probably hear it many more times before you *truly* understand it and have the ability to apply it to your life. Still, today felt like at least a tiny movement in the right direction!

### Day 7

My meditation this morning was deep and calm; both body and mind felt more still than they have for some time. Simultaneously, I felt a strong sense of *metta*, loving-kindness. My heart felt light and open and this sense of peace seamlessly echoed throughout my tea time. I noticed that I was more present today. My movements felt slow and controlled, easy almost. I also noticed that when my mind did wander it was only for a fleeting moment before it returned to the tea. Usually this sort of returning requires a great deal of determination and an internal battle ensues over where my mind should be focused! Overall, my final session of meditation before tea was one of peaceful rapture.

### Day 8

Today marked the first day of the next stage of my experiment, tea *before* meditation. My tea session was peaceful. There was a real sense of quiet as I gazed out of my patio doors, occasionally noticing the wisps of incense smoke drifting around my living room. As I drank my last bowl and settled my hands into the *dhyana mudra*, the first thing I noticed was the clarity of mind and my level of focus. I dropped right into meditation with a real sense of purpose. I gently watched my breath with an unusually low amount of distraction until my alarm sounded to signify the end of meditation and the start of my day. I was feeling good!

## Day 9

This morning's session was a difficult one for me. A lack of sleep left me feeling agitated and my mind was alight with distraction throughout. My tea brewing felt clumsy, too. On one occasion, I very nearly knocked my teapot over with my sleeve and at times I seemed to pour water anywhere but where I needed it to go! My meditation was equally full of distractions, least of all due to my cats fighting an epic duel over territory with another local feline halfway through my sit! My ego was tempted to write today off and simply make tomorrow "Day Number 9" instead. (After all, only I would know!) But I realized the importance of recording the experiences just as I had them, especially the more difficult ones. These "bad" experiences, as we tend to label them, often hold deeper teachings than those we deem to be "good." One other thing that today's session did highlight for me, though, was how my awareness increased the more I brought my attention back to the present moment. I was very distracted, but at least I was aware of it. Today's session may not have been blissful, but it was productive!

## Day 10

Today started with a deep feeling of joy. Last night, I welcomed home a dear friend who had just spent three months in the mountains of Spain on an ordination retreat. She returned home adorned in a glow as beautiful as her new Buddhist name. The Nottingham Sangha was out in force, and its warmth and energy was palpable! As I settled onto my cushion this morning, I took a moment to express my gratitude for all that I have, and to recognize how fortunate I am in all aspects of my life, before carefully pouring the water to heat my teaware. I spent the following thirty minutes paying close attention to each movement,

making sure that the left and right sides were working interdependently and flowing in circles towards the center as we've learnt in this magazine. As I moved into meditation, I felt profoundly energized. Despite a feeling of determination, however, this energy did prove to be distracting throughout, as I was often consumed with many thoughts and feelings. During my tea session, I was able to rein in this energy by focusing it on my movements with positive effect. But during meditation, it was a hindrance!

## Day 11

I was awoken by the rain today. As I prepared my tea space, I opened the French doors and breathed in the petrichor, immediately feeling a wave of joy and calmness envelop me. I settled down on my cushion as the kettle warmed and looked out into my garden. I watched the birds foraging for moss and listened to them sing, as a string of incense smoke gave in to the breeze. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, opened my eyes and poured my first bowl of tea. Then another. Again and again, becoming more still with each sip until the tea was done. I then closed my eyes again and folded my hands, dropping into meditation. I suppose one could argue that this morning was a bit of a cheat, as far as my experiment goes, since I was definitely in a form of meditation before and throughout the tea session today. My mind conjured images of friends I would have loved to have shared this experience with, pouring *metta* as well as tea into each of their bowls. I remained still and peaceful until the time came to begin my day.

## Day 12

As my kettle started to murmur, I began to feel grounded. The world once again felt quiet outside and I sensed that this feeling was reflected inside me as well. As I lifted the first bowl to my mouth, my senses were ignited by the fragrance of the tea. I felt my eyes widen in ecstasy as my mind began to imagine the taste even before the liquor passed my lips. I was not disappointed! Fully absorbed in the tea, I remained focused on each bowl. I tried to capture every nuance of each steeping: Was the temperature quite right? What was the mouthfeel like? How easy was it to swallow? Was there much of an aftertaste? I found myself surprised at how some days these aspects of tea are so invigorating when my mind is concentrated, and conversely how I fail to even consider them on days when I'm more distracted. I kept my mind returning to my *hara* during my sit, occasionally noticing a returning of the tea on my breath and a sense of joy that came with it.

## Day 13

I stayed up too late last night drinking puerh and reading, and this was very evident this morning! Although I felt calm and happy, there was an awkwardness to my movements—a sort of time delay between thought and action, which led to a few minor collisions between kettles, pots and cups. (Gladly nothing serious!) I was also very aware that my inner monologue was almost constant throughout my sessions and although my thoughts were pleasant, they were seldom about the tea in front of me! My meditation was much the same, although admittedly it was a little more concentrated than the tea session that preceded it. By constantly returning to the body, and my present moment experience, I at least found a few minutes of stillness!

## Day 14

I've been studying a book on conditionality lately as part of a dharma course at the Nottingham Buddhist Centre. One thing in particular stood out to me this morning, and it was something that a friend said last night. It was a quote by Heraclitus: "No man ever steps in the same river twice," for it's not the same river and he's not the same man. As I sat drinking a bowl of Old Man Camphor brewed with the last of the leaves I received with the magazine, I knew that this would be the last time I would probably ever get to drink this particular tea. As I took another sip, it occurred to me that this very bowl would be the last bowl of tea to ever taste just like this, and so I attempted to savor every moment of it! I then tried to apply this concept to the rest of my time on my cushion. Each breath was the first and last to be just like that, as the next breath was different; and so too was I. What I noticed was how much more focused I was on every aspect of my experience—each element of it felt special and worthy of being cherished.

## What I learned

Whilst at times my descriptions in this diary may appear to be a little lacking in what one might call progression (at times one could even argue there is some visible regression) I felt the need to write honestly about my experience so that anyone reading this could get a sense of the extent to which my, and presumably anyone else's, experience varies from moment to moment, day to day. Whilst I am an extremely novice practitioner by comparison, I'm sure that even the most seasoned of sages have days like these, or at least I would like to think so!

After two weeks of studying my own practice, I have one firm conclusion: tea and meditation are powerful allies, and of this I have no doubt. Regardless of which order you choose, really they are one and the same thing if practiced correctly. On days where I was grounded and focused during my tea session, I found that my meditation was deeper and more profound. Likewise, on days when my mind was calm and peaceful during meditation, I found deeper levels of experiential joy and improved awareness during my tea session. Although not ostensibly a part of this experiment, I also think it's worth considering the activities I participated in on the night before certain tea sessions. Those nights in which I participated in acts of spiritual cultivation such as ritual, meditation or study often laid the foundations for a productive experience the following morning. If I consider Wu De's teaching, "How we do one thing is how we do everything," then I can see a direct relationship between the activities I choose to devote my time to and the consequences I experience in my life. This short experiment has encouraged me to devote more time to analyzing my life both at and away from the tea table, as they too are ultimately the same. Tea and Zen have the same taste; they are not one and not two. I believe this to be the right understanding.



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