# The Best Tea Session

茶人: *Wu De* (無的)

*This article is also taken from Wu De's book, "Zen & Tea One Flavor." These chapters are a great way to explore Zen, Tea and their relationship. Wu De's teachings on Zen always make our next tea session a bit deeper and more fulfilling. When the ancients said Tea and Zen were the same flavor, they didn't mean tea as a kind of Buddhist ritual. They were talking about that wordless hush before the Buddha raised the lotus on Vulture Peak. They were talking about Bodhidharma's marrow—given to Hui Ke for the perspicacity of his silent bow—and Hui Neng's sieve. They were saying that the essence of Zen is often more easily communicated through art and life than it is in words, though it can indeed be instigated by language. You could say that Zen has always been based on the intention of the Buddha and all the masters who followed to cast the light of that one primal illumination: our true self is not this egoic I-subject, and there is no-thing apart from Mind. All the meditation techniques, the moral precepts, the slaps and whacks, the nonsensical gibberish and the pots and pots of tea have all steeped in this truth, since before anyone ever said the word "Chan (禪)."*

There were three samurai who met regularly for tea. All of them had studied for decades, and they considered themselves spiritual brothers since they were all students of the same Zen master.

One fine day they met for tea, sitting in silence by a creek, listening to it rattle on over flattened stones like distant sutras chanted by a chorus of monastics. After some time, they decided to have a walk, the Qi from the seven bowls of tea they'd enjoyed pleasantly carrying them onward. They talked openly and freely, without any of the semblance they ordinarily adhered to in society. Part of why they gathered, in fact, was to abandon their roles and responsibilities for a time. Somehow the conversation turned to the best tea sessions they had ever had.

The first samurai captivated them with a story of a pilgrimage he'd taken years ago with their Zen master. On their way to a distant temple, they had stopped at a small country inn. A bright and forthright young boy offered them tea since his father, the proprietor, was out picking herbs in the mountain. The samurai explained how both his master and himself had been captivated by the boy's honesty: trying to steep the tea as his father had taught him, he did it with care and joy, patience and mindfulness—all without any affectation. The master later said the tea tasted so pure for that reason—the boy was unusual in that he wasn't at all embarrassed or trying to impress them. Though he made mistakes, they were natural and only brought grace to the liquor. He didn't need to apologize for the tea he spilled. His innocence was there in the tea, and the samurai thought it delicious and memorable.

The second samurai spoke of the time he had drunk tea with a famous tea master, whose skill in tea preparation rivaled any of the greats in history—even Master Lu Yu himself. He used the highest quality tea the samurai had ever seen. He heated the water in a pure silver kettle and steeped the tea in an ancient clay pot and equally old cups, painted porcelain with bright blue dragons. The liquor was exquisite, coating the mouth and throat and lasting on the breath for hours. The Qi also was delightful, and he could remember feeling it course through his limbs even late that night as he lay down to sleep. The lingering sweetness had impressed his soul, lasting until that very day they walked beside the stream.

The last samurai said that if they would deign to indulge him, he would save his tale for the following afternoon—if they would meet him at a certain time. Curious, his two companions wholeheartedly agreed. They couldn't wait to hear his story.

The following afternoon he led them down to the city park, near the banks of the river where they found the rickety, old bamboo stall of the Old Tea Seller, Baisao. He had a small wooden table and simple pots and bowls. The old monk had long ago abandoned his monastic robes, donning the white and black Crane Robes of the ancient Daoist hermits, offering tea by the roadside for donations. Through connections with his hometown, the only open port in the kingdom, he was able to get small quantities of rare teas from the Mainland—some even aged and deep. The samurai thought their friend wished to buy them a cup of tea to drink as he regaled them with his story, but the true tale had already started with the simmering of the kettle on the coals.

The old man's clothes were stained and his teaware chipped, but there was obvious grace and mastery in his hands—there for any that had the eye to notice it, and the three samurai definitely did. They soon forgot all about why their friend had invited them, slipping into the dark tea the master prepared. Some of the few who knew about his small stall bragged that while the famous Chinese master Lu Tong needed "seven bowls" to reach the Land of the Immortals, Baisao could take you there in one.

The tea transcended quality. It was neither simple and unaffected, nor refined and delicate. The samurai lost themselves in its depths, though the cups seemed shallow. Afterwards, they understood why their friend had invited them. The old master smiled and his eyes twinkled like an innocently naughty child. They each put a coin in his bamboo tube, which read: "The price of this tea is anything from a single sen to a thousand gold pieces. Otherwise, it is free. I only wish I could give it to you for less!"

# Commentary

The word "Zen" comes from the Chinese "*Chan*," which is itself a derivative of the Sanskrit "*Dhyana*," meaning "meditation." Zen is meditation. But not in the sense of "contemplation." Actually, *Dhyana* could be translated as "being-onto." It means being an open space for awareness. In being-onto a cup of tea, the distinction between the I-subject and the tea is erased. Zen is this open space—direct and unaffected observation. There is no word in all the ten-thousand languages that can really capture it as such, though any organization of words might instigate it if you're in the right space. "Spirituality" also falls short, though it is perhaps a step in the right direction to recognize that the world is "spirit," rather than these clunky "objects" we think are so solid. Modern scientists have also verified that matter truly is energy, after all. Some people think that spirituality of any kind is hocus-pocus and wave it off as fantasy: "I'm an ordinary guy. I get paid, watch TV and date my girlfriend. I have more important things to do with my time," etc., etc. But who is really fantasizing? The one who is deluded into believing they can actually own things, living through virtual entertainment and not in touch at all with such obvious and very real truths as how fleeting a life on this giant rock whirling millions of miles the hour through space really is or the one sitting with complete sobriety, upright and aware as she quietly observes all the subtle nuances in a bowl of tea? (And that wasn't meant to be a rhetorical question—I'm really asking!)

As the Mahayana teaching in sutras like the Prajnaparamita Sutra, which emphasized direct, experiential wisdom, came to China and blended with the meditations and philosophies of Daoist hermits, all kinds of new approaches and spiritual ways were developed, including the first ever self-sufficient monasteries. These Zen monks were among the first tea farmers, in fact. And since that time the paradox of such direct, intuitive wisdom in the present, ordinary moment in opposition to the need for meditation—often called "Zazen" after the Japanese pronunciation—this illogicality has been central to all Zen thought and discourse. After all, why meditate at all if we are already enlightened? Wouldn't such practices then just be polishing the ego, using spirituality itself to be a brighter, stronger identity? Other masters, like Dogen-zenji, taught that when meditation is done purely, and for its own sake, that itself is enlightenment—and in that state it isn't "you" who meditates, but the Buddha.

The famous passing on of the bowl and robe from the fifth to the sixth patriarch holds a clue as to how we can transcend this absurdity, not metaphysically but actually. The fifth patriarch was getting old and it was time to pass on the staff. He suggested a poetry contest—the award being the robe and bowl Bodhidharma had himself carried from India, handed down from the very Buddha himself. The senior disciple Shen Hsiu composed a poem, which captured his understanding of Zen. He was, however, a bit trepid and decided to first tack it to the abbot's door anonymously. It read:

*The body is a Bodhi-tree,*
*the mind a stand of mirror bright.*
*Take care to wipe the mirror clean,*
*so there is nowhere for the dust to light.*

The next day the old abbot had incense burned before the poem, calling it brilliant. That night, after the evening meditation, he read the poem before the congregation and said that anyone who put this into practice would surely become a buddha. But in the middle of that night, a little kitchen boy named Hui Neng tiptoed to the abbot's door and tacked another poem beneath it. It said:

*There never was a Bodhi-tree,*
*nor a stand of mirror bright.*
*So please do tell me,*
*where is the dust to light?*

Despite the fact that the entire community was against him, the old abbot led the young man to a nearby hill and bestowed the bowl and robe on him, as he had indeed proved himself worthy of the role and of the tradition of Zen.

Commonly, this is interpreted to mean that Hui Neng "won," and that his poem was "better" or somehow "higher." But if Shen Hsiu's poem did not capture Zen, then why did the master have incense burnt before it and call it brilliant, admonishing his students to heed its wisdom? Obviously, the master understood and recognized Hui Neng's insight, even before it was written, so why would he commend Shen Hsiu's if he felt it was incomplete? Also, according to the legend, the fifth patriarch instructed Hui Neng to travel south and spend the next years in retreat, practicing—so again why would he recognize Hui Neng's insight on the one hand and tell him to go practice on the other? Are the two poems really antithetical? Are they mutually exclusive? Can only one be true? And, finally, did Hui Neng's poem really trump Shen Hsiu's?

Perhaps Hui Neng's natural grace or deep understanding of Zen allowed him to penetrate the issue. But it was not, as is often proposed, that he outstripped Shen Hsiu. That is not why the abbot gave him the robe and bowl. No. The true power of Hui Neng's poem is in the relationship between the two poems and the way they compliment each other. One does not negate the other; instead, they dance together as partners. And this waltz is Zen—when the music is so great that both partners forget themselves and their roles, merging into the Dao itself.

There is a very real sense in which you cannot put energy into a future, enlightened "you." The ordinary life, living here and now is already it—this tea you drink is Zen practice, without remainder. And yet, philosophically this falls short, becoming at worst a justification to do anything you want including excess or laziness. While Zen would not judge debauchery, neither would it justify it—no matter what intellectual acrobatics you can perform, the monks of old were all chaste, practicing temperance and moral uprightness. Zen does offer spiritual freedom—to interpret the precepts as you would—but it does not shirk the consequences of behavior either. This doesn't mean there necessarily is

a judgment or even the need to believe that the universe is karmically interested in our moral behavior, as some do; it is only to say that actions have consequences, and we are not able to foresee any of the unraveled ends of our actions, which spiral off and affect the world in myriad ways. The precepts are, in their purest form, but more skillful means—*upaya*. Actually, when you are pure, all that you touch is pure. There is no real formula for purity, just as there is no 1-2-3 recipe for Zen tea. I like St. Augustine's simple advice regarding our moral base (sila): "Love, and do what you will."

The innocent boy in this cup-story is beautiful. He is our buddha-nature, free of mind and its burden. He needs no discipline or practice. How can you practice being what you are? He is spontaneous and unaffected. He is the brush behind Hui Neng's poem. But his purity is short-lived: soon the vicissitudes of life will solidify his ego and he'll grow separate from the world before his return at death, or by grace in transcendence. He makes great tea because his mind doesn't tamper with the moment. It's almost as if the preparation were a natural extension of the tea bush's growth. There is indeed harmony in such a cup.

Then there is the expert of the second samurai's story. He has mastered the Cha part, but hasn't yet realized that tea prepared in this way always falls short, even if it be only slightly so. No matter how masterfully processed and prepared—no matter how great the tea and teaware—without the Dao, Cha is still in the material realm, and therefore often inspires greed and possessiveness. Most (not all) such Tea men (Chajin) end up lost in snobbery—without realizing that in Nature, beyond the mind, leaves are just leaves. The quality they value so highly is mind-made, in other words. In Zen, such "experts" get busy huffing and puffing their 'isms' and schisms, arguing the fine points of what is "True Zen" and who it's taught by—just as the former kind of experts do with varieties of tea and teaware.

Finally there is the true master, Baisao, who has learned the ways of the world and is wise. He meditates and understands Zen because he has read scriptures and books. He also has great skill in his hands, brewing the tea expertly and with grace. He knows the ins and outs of tea, and can caress the best out of it in all circumstances. Nevertheless, he is not lost in the "Cha" part of Cha Dao, which only leads to snobbery and materialism; but neither is he dreamy, lost in the "Dao." The Cha and Dao of Cha Dao must each be balanced. Too much Cha leads to possessiveness and greed—stuff we're using to fulfill some sense of lack. But tea is also not escapism, and neither is Zen, so too much focus on the Dao leads to cloudy, blissed-out meditations that are too far from the daily life. The master is grounded in Cha Dao, with skill in meditation and the material side as well. All the subtle additions he adds in technique and the great teaware he uses add up, and the cup is so refined you barely feel the tea liquor passing through your mouth—though it coats the throat and stays with the breath for hours to come. This tea is more refined, deeper and wiser. His mirror is clean of all dust: it shows you your ego and asks you to look upon it with insight; look upon it and realize there never was a mirror.

The real, indescribable Zen, is beyond the whole distinction of quality. In this space—the truly "enlightened" space, so to speak—there is neither enlightenment nor delusion. The innocence and mastery have merged and the paradox is resolved. That is the space between the poems, where they fall hopelessly in love with each other's eyes. There are then no more isms and schisms; no more agreeing or disagreeing. You can't disagree with Reality—not when it's fully present. There are many koans where a student says that he heard something like, "Bright and clear are the hundred grasses; bright and clear our ancestor's teaching" from some other master. The student then asks the master if this is correct, and the master answers that it's a terrible excuse for an understanding of Zen. When the student then asks the master for his understanding, he replies: "Bright and clear are the hundred grasses; bright and clear our ancestor's teaching!" Though the phrase changes, this formula repeats throughout many Zen parables. The master is attacking the student's tendency towards distinction itself—the division is itself the issue.

Sometimes we have to wait for the right catalyst to come about—the right smack on the face or cup of tea. Then everything falls into place. There is then Zen in the tea, sparkling just near the rim where the liquor turns golden, but no Zen in the mind. Master Rikyu's name, given to him when he was ordained, is a testament to this since "ri" means "sharpness" and "kyu" means "leisure," "rest" or "non-doing." Zen is a sharp leisure, an adroit rest. Zen is Rikyu.

## 佛法僧

*It is the mind*
*That aspires*
*To set out onto the path*
*That is my very own*
*And revered master.*

*—Attributed to Sen No Rikyu*