



THE ROAD TO TEA, THE ROAD TO OURSELVES

BY HENRY TAIKI TAKAHASHI

In this life we often work and play with the assumption that our consciousness is singular, unique and but a part of an “objective” world that is “out there”. Without a practice to root us in a real understanding of ourselves, we are pulled this way and that by the objects of that outer world, becoming circumstances of our times. To find our destiny we need a Way to turn on and off the whole distinction between our subjective self and the outside world, as that idea of an “objective” world is still within our experience of ourselves. This Way must be practical, concrete and applicable to our daily lives. Though it would be wonderful to seek out the mountains “above the clouds”, as the ancient seekers once did, in this age we must create our own hermitages. Our thatched huts must be within our hearts, as they should be anyway.

There is an old Buddhist parable of a young monk who was searching for the perfect place to begin his meditation. He traveled throughout the Himalayas, but hadn't yet found the right place to practice. Eventually, he came upon a saint walking down a small mountain path. When asked where he was coming from, the saint answered “from my place of practice.” The young monk asked where this place was. The saint offered to show him right there and then, asking the monk to sit with him in meditation by the side of the road. The monk then understood where the “place of practice” really was.

Eastern religions aren't alone in having the idea that the master's home is the whole world, his very roof the open sky. Unfettered by illusions and the influence of what we see as beyond ourselves, whether desirable or repulsive, we can respond to the destiny that awaits us with a clear mind—the “original self” that was there before our lives began, and will remain when our bodies are gone.

Tied up in our illusory ideas of ego as a kind of bubble drifting through the world there is the idea that Man and Nature are separate. Armed with this philosophy we've transformed the world into a reflection of an ostracized Nature—polluting and destroying our environment without recognizing the painfully obvious truth that we are that environment and its pollution can only result in our own destruction as well. As these truths become harsh lessons, modern man is coming to understand more clearly that we are in fact a part of this world, not guests that inhabit it for some time. Without a Way to begin again the dialogue between Man and Nature, the sickness that has befallen society and the environment equally affects the individual; in the end, the greater problems of our times are made by groups of individuals anyway.

Through stillness and connection to Nature, it is possible for us to express—in this very life—the wisdom of a higher path. But we must travel that Way. There must be a method to the madness. It is somewhat paradoxical that our “separateness” from Nature, ourselves, each other and the universe is illusory, and yet at the same time it is a very real problem. In truth, the separation of Man and Nature is not – and never was – “real”, but as an illusion it still has power and a very real impact on our personal and collective welfare.

In other words, we need a Way to realize that there is no Way, a method of living with the world as an expression of its need to reflect itself. Such a journey culminates in the balance between the times when we need to be a distinct ego that works and interacts with others and the times when we are still. This dynamic expresses the original wisdom of Nature itself. If these times are in harmony, there is a chance for us to find and express our destiny as beautiful beings. Perhaps we are indeed bubbles floating on the surface of the Great



River that is this world, but we are also, then, aspects of that River itself, and if we can live within its currents as both bubbles and River, we will have found a concordance with the Truth that is our very Nature, and through that a better, healthier life as individuals and as a society.

As a result, the Way that we follow must not be something we set aside time for. It must, in fact, be our daily lives, rather than merely a part of them. Everything we do must be an expression of the journey that is our very experience of this life. Our daily activities themselves are the seeds with which we sow our gardens of enlightenment. What then, you may ask, is missing from our daily routine as it is? The answer to that is as paradoxical and absurd as all the great Zen koans and riddles passed from master to student: Nothing.... Nothing is missing. And yet, while there is no 'time' for practice, just as there is no 'place'—as the young monk learned in the aforementioned story—we must have a focus for developing the stillness and completion that comes with seeing Reality as it is.

Through tea, we may start the dialogue with Nature again, finding a way to communicate with each other and ourselves with more sincerity, honesty and openness to the expression of the Way manifested through us.

Tea was for thousands of years within the realm of the spirit, an aspect of a life lived with Dao. It was first steeped in bowls by shamans, Daoist mendicants and Buddhist monks. All the famous tea mountains are also home to ancient temples, monasteries and nunneries. It was, in fact, these monks who first domesticated the Leaf and carried it with them to other mountains, and eventually to Japan as well.

As a simple expression of nothing more than gathering water, preparing fire, heating the water and steeping the tea, the whole process of making tea is our

daily lives. There can be nothing more mundane than gathering water and preparing a fire. And yet there is also, resting in plain sight, a very real sense where the sharing of that pot or bowl of tea is transcendent, whether we share it with ourselves or with each other. It reflects both the mundane world of egos and bodies going about their business, as well as the stillness of Nature, radiantly free of all our influences. But what about tea is conducive to this harmony?

The Dao of Tea is not within the method of preparation. You won't find it in a list of the ways to brew tea. As one travels the road of tea, one more and more understands that there is no proper method to brew tea. Not only do different cultures express tea in different ways, there is also as much individual articulation as there is in any art. Many times, if we make tea into a study of the "proper" utensils and methods, brewing times, amounts, etc. the Dao is lost; for it is not the "Cha" in "Cha Dao" that requires effort, but the "Dao." Knowing about tea, in other words, won't make the experience of drinking it any more spiritually rewarding than any other activity; just as one may read a thousand, thousand books on Zen and still never come close to expressing what it means in one's life. In fact, over-analyzing the artistic process is a surefire way to clog the channels of inspiration.

There is but one suggestion that we might offer if you wish to utilize tea as a method of attaining more self-awareness: **Reverence**. If you bring reverence to the act of tea, "gathering the wood and water with your own hands" as Master Rikyu symbolically proclaimed, you will already be traveling the Way. The path itself is expressed in this reverence—reverence for the sun and sky, the rain and earth that made the tea leaves; reverence for the utensils that embrace it; reverence for the others we share the tea with; and, most importantly, reverence of ourselves.



The way to make tea a Dao lies not in how we make our tea, but in the mind that pervades and then ultimately consumes the tea. Nothing can be of greater consequence. There is no utensil, pot, or even high-quality leaves that can make up for the dilemmas in the minds of those preparing and enjoying the tea. The tea liquor itself reflects perfectly, in every minute detail, the minds of those present. It will be as deep, ruffled or balanced as the beings that interact with it. And it is steeped in this wisdom that tea becomes the center around which our daily lives themselves can revolve.

We can watch our tea, using it as a mirror to reflect the ways in which our every action, in all that we do, is affecting the tea. Any change we make in our daily life will cause ripples across the surface of our tea liquor; and if we just listen carefully, the tea itself will guide us to the balanced place where the times of being an ego and the times of stillness are in harmony, as we discussed above. Then there won't even be a need to

watch or reflect on the ways our lives affect our tea, because at that time our lives will be tea, and tea our lives.

Through tea we can learn and achieve a proper diet, a genuine and healthy relationship with others and ourselves, simplicity, humility, and myriad other beneficial qualities that are ultimately derived from the reverence of life, Nature and ourselves that Cha Dao inspires. If you but hold the next bowl with this reverence, you will have taken the first step down the Path of Tea.

The Leaf