

SEEKING TEA, FINDING DAO

BY ERICKE SMITHE



“Not so much proud of his songs but of the measureless ocean of love within him, and freely poured it forth...”—W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*—

Sing then O’ tea of the glories of Thy self! Course through my veins and fill my head with Thy melodies. Find for me the words with which to tell of this new world to which I am so newly come—not the outer world, but that which exists within. And entering the world of tea and Dao isn’t as though reaching a destination. The journey inward is an endless road, trailing upward to hazy vistas of mountain sky.

Let me then tell you where and how this Dao began for me, or more correctly where I first noticed it, somewhat in spite of myself: in a tea shop in a small village of Taiwan. For me, the tasting of the Dao and the tasting of tea are separated but by very little, so I often tell their story together. The Dao is present before our very eyes yet most often we fail to see it; it rests within our very palm and yet we usually fail to grasp it. Its presence can be felt in clear, clean water, though we often don’t notice it when we drink—at least I didn’t; not until that water embraced some fine tea.

Perhaps I should begin where any good story might: in the middle. In a small town on a rather small island, in the midst of a vast sea, along the side of a highway, is one of the finest tea shops in the world. It would be very easy to miss. In fact, it seems a little unlikely at first to think that Taiwan, such a small country, could possibly have so much fine tea. It is after all overlooked by most countries in the world, dwarfed in prestige by its neighbors. If, however, you did come to find that Taiwan is home to some of the greatest collections of old Puerh in the world, you would then not

be faulted for expecting them all to be housed in cities, within imposing buildings or in affluent neighborhoods. And, indeed, there are collections in such places, with many fine teas. Some collectors share their tea freely, while others keep them in vaults, behind glass or in museums; and all too often the custodians who watch over these teas would never think of drinking something so valuable. These shops, although surely of interest to any tea lover, are to be found in any number of cities in Asia. There are certainly many fine places to view antique Puerh or hear speak of its mystique, but you will likely find the owners less than forthcoming if you suggest that they take one of the cakes down off the wall, break some off and steep it.

To find the Dao we must at times do exactly the opposite of what our rational mind tells us. We must increasingly allow intuition to be our guide. If logic suggests that the best place to find tea must be in big cities, then perhaps a trip to the countryside is in order. If one really wishes to drink teas that are beyond what is commonly available, one must be prepared to seek out the private sessions happening around the world—the sessions where such teas are being brought down from high shelves, out from their hidden cubbies, sealed jars or antique containers. And the quest has nothing to do with money, for many of the best teas are not available at any price. They can, however, be drunk for free. I have heard it said of truly rare and fine teas that there is no price that could capture them,



just like a great and transformative piece of art. Most of the greatest teas I (as well as other ordinary tea lovers I know) have drunk, were not teas I myself own or could ever afford. It seems that even those who do have them, found them at times and places where acquiring them was easy and rather inexpensive, suggesting a hint of destiny.

In order to find the Dao of tea, one must allow for changes in perspective, and often look at things differently. A tea session in nature, for example, can inspire an awe for a tea that we may have thought we already knew so well. Long ago, tea sages drank most all their tea beneath mountains, under the moon or in bamboo groves, knowing the ambience affected the tea as much as the water, teaware or even the leaves themselves. We are not really closer to the Dao in nature than we were in the city, for the Dao is just as present on Broadway as it is on a broad field; it is simply that

in nature there are fewer things to distract us from appreciating its movement. Lao Tzu and Kong Fu Tzu, as well as others less prolific, retreated to the strongholds of Mao Shan and Hua Shan in order to observe the Dao. Those who likewise wish to observe the Dao through tea are similarly recommended to step off the beaten path. Not far off, mind you—as I said, even just a little off the highway may do. Some people risk themselves and travel to Asia, finding great tea in a simple shop down some small alley that even the locals often never go in, while others stay at home and wonder why they aren't able to find fine tea. Finding my favorite tea shop was all about such a willingness to explore.

You would think that such a fine tea shop should not exist in such an unlikely place. It really is wonderfully absurd that within this tea shop, housed in a converted bungalow, next to a truck stop, along the side of a busy interchange way out in the country, one is able to find teas capable of revealing the greatest insights, opening whole new worlds of previously unknown pleasure. Such is the Dao. The greatest rewards await us in the most unlikely of places. Logic can only take us so far, and the rest is all spirit and intuition. I can't think of how many times, against my better judgment, I walked down the wrong road or took a wrong turn, in travel and in life, for reasons entirely unknown to me, only to be rewarded most unexpectedly. This spirit, the very same which commands the man with the divining rod to find water, must also be employed in the search of good tea.

Tea at its height aspires to the highest reaches of human experience. The fact that it is beneficial to one's health almost seems comically shortsighted compared to the states which can be achieved when drinking it meditatively. Great tea is not something that needs to



be intellectualized, and it is not easily speculated upon. It must be drunk to be understood. By drinking fine teas we come to have a better understanding of tea in general; though the process unfortunately doesn't work so well in the reverse. Until one drinks a fine tea, the experience is way too abstract to share, though we try with the hopes that others will also begin to see that tea contains such depth.

My first experiences of the transformative power of tea came from drinking vintage Puerh. These were the teas that for me unlocked new dimensions of consciousness. By increments, I came to better understand the scope of tea, and the effects it can have on our lives. At first, I noticed how it enhanced my body and mind. Later, as I passed from beginner to seasoned beginner, I came to appreciate teas which are not definable by any unit of measure—they can only be described in the language reserved for matters of the spirit; and even then less than satisfactorily. The finest teas are truly vast oceans of experience—oceans without bottoms, without shores.

The idea that such experiences existed was not particularly foreign to me by the time I walked up to the back door of the small house cum tea shop, a

short motorcycle trip from where I lived in a neighboring city. I had travelled, read some books and had been actively studying Qi Gong for a few years at that point—I thought myself somewhat worldly. Suffice it to say I had no idea what I was stepping into. I remember very clearly walking in from the hot, muggy midday sun into an even muggier room where the air seemed to be mixed in equal parts with the musk of tea fermenting. As I moved further inside, I felt my eyes brighten and my skin began to tingle slightly as if under a mild electric current. This feeling is known to anyone who practices Tai Chi or Kung Fu, has ever walked in the mountains, or woken up at dawn and let the first rays of sun warm one's being. It was the vibration of Qi, and the air there was filled with it, as if electrified by a Tesla coil. The owner of the shop was also a little more than I had expected: a man about six feet tall, with long black, wavy hair, a broad face and a penetrating yet somewhat distant gaze. I felt a little ill at ease, as if he was a priest and I had something to confess. Dressed in white linen pajamas—his uniform I would come to find out—he rose from the car seat of a mini-van, which he had bolted to the floor as a meditation perch because he found it “more comfort-



able.” I knew immediately I had stumbled upon something special. In truth, however, I hadn’t really found it by myself—I had, after all, been brought there. I had come expecting something mundane, only to find something extraordinary. And so passed my introduction into the world of fine tea...

The tea master wears many hats: sometimes shaman, sometimes doctor, sometimes psychologist or priest, but of these roles his greatest is that of matchmaker; brokering the marriages, one might say, of those bound to fall hopelessly in love with tea. One of the slogans hanging on a banner in the shop reads “only experts are permitted to enter”. This announcement serves more than just to make those who sit triumphantly around the tea table feel pleased with themselves after a heavy session. Contrary to the way it sounds, it is not born of pride. The slogan reveals the critical point: that between good tea and the individual there must be an introduction before there can be interaction. The tea master serves as this intermediary



between tea and Man, between Heaven and Earth, and has done so in China for thousands of years. Tea is even thought of as a highly elevated being, both elegant and refined, so the introduction could be viewed quite literally.

As a sentient being—though not conscious in the way a human is—tea is born, it lives for a time and then dies, or more romantically sacrifices itself for the spiritual benefit of the tea drinker. Masters like Mr. He say that these teas go to whom they are meant to; that they have lives and destinies of their own. He also says that when the man is looking for the tea, the tea is also looking for the man. If we accept that there is a Law uniting all things—call it what you will—then certainly it must also apply to tea. To be able to drink a truly fine tea is a fortuitous encounter, as great as finding a gem in the grass or meeting a highly-evolved teacher willing to share his or her wisdom. When the tea drinker meets with a fine tea, the inner world becomes connected with Nature and the heart blooms as if in the springtime of the soul, though on the outside one may be in fact sitting comfortably in a tea shop in the midst of the city, or next to a truck stop even.

A great tea can be likened to the Queen of Fauna, her majesty *Camellia*. One does not encounter a Queen while walking the aisles of a supermarket nor on Edgeware Road—to meet her one must be introduced. Securing the introduction may be difficult, but if it can happen to one ordinary guy from Canada, it could happen to anyone. My introduction came through one such man, such a matchmaker, the chairman of the Cha Dao Research Society, He Tsai Bing.

It is not surprising, perhaps, to find a businessman of great charisma who—having attained some



means—then decides to trade it in on a contemplative life in the country. Nor is it terribly surprising that one man could assemble so much fine tea in a personal collection. But what is most peculiar about Master He is his overwhelming desire to share his discovery of the wondrous and mystical world of fine tea with friends and strangers alike. In fact, he makes little distinction between them—all visitors are those who have simply answered the call of the tea. One of the slogans of the shop is “ask the tea”. One does not, in other words, question the Dao; one simply accepts whatever comes along.

Mr. He is a man who relies entirely upon intuition, whether in buying tea, brewing it or even driving his car. His decisions are often made immediately and on the spot, and before others have had the chance to consider, he has often already acted. “Intuition,” he says, “should be trusted above all else”, and from speaking with him it would seem that one requirement for staying in step with the Dao is that one be completely present in one’s heart. In order to stay in tune with the Dao we must learn to anticipate its changes, much like with Jazz. And that happens when the heart is open, and one is listening to its song.

Tea is an aspect of the Dao, and as such brings us ever closer to a union with her by constantly removing obstacles from our path, which hinder our vision. Tea, to me, is something akin to the grease on the wheels of a bullock cart, carrying us ever closer to the Divine. While I may still have a long ways to go to “open the shadowy portal”—as the ancient Daoists called the enlightened experience—there are teas that can seemingly bring one to that door, whether or not one has the strength to open it. The finest teas provide visions, glimpses of inner worlds; or perhaps of this one in times ahead. The more we drink tea, the longer these glimpses last and the more the line between the inner and outer world becomes blurred, like that which is and that which could be meeting each other face to face.

This year, the Cha Dao Research Society has produced a book documenting its “100 Sessions of Tea”, which outlines its philosophy behind attaining the Dao through tea. The 100 sessions spanned two years, and the book serves in part as a tasting record for 500 varieties of very fine and often very old tea; many of which are now extinct. A number of these teas are of the sort more likely to be found in museums rather



than being served at a large tea gathering. However, Master He is fond of saying that he is not a museum curator, he is a King. For him, all tea, even great and priceless tea, is ultimately meant to be enjoyed. Even the most costly of teas are prepared almost casually and entirely without effort by Master He, for no purpose other than the transcendental pleasure of his guests. One may wonder why one man should be blessed with such fortune, not only to possess such exquisite teas, but moreover to be able to steep and drink them entirely without regret. The answer may simply be that he reveres them more; or perhaps his very willingness to share them is the reason these teas have found him.

When the time came for an English translation to be made of *Tea and the Dao*, the title of the aforementioned “100 Sessions of Tea”, I immediately wanted to be a part of it. Now it is in its final stages, and will be in print before the end of the year. To be certain, it is not the common record of a tea gathering, nor is it a monument to excess. Rather, it is a testament to spiritual opulence. It is a book of peerless import for those whose tea goes beyond the realms of mere beverage, or art form, or ceremony; for those to whom drinking tea means becoming utterly immersed in the Dao.

Tea at its highest level is nothing short of a conversation with God. It, like yoga or meditation, Zen or even gardening, are all vehicles for attaining spiritual consciousness. Great tea, or even the shadow of greatness present in seemingly ordinary tea, can not be put into words. It must be felt. It must be experienced. It must be revered. There is no science to the art; no book or article that can do more than give hints of its presence, and/or guiding tips to find the sessions

where it is freely being poured. To understand the Dao is to appreciate the majesty of her mystery. “Beyond the shadowy portal” there is nothing that can be recorded or discussed. May her mysteries never be revealed!

Ultimately, tea consciousness must not begin or end within the confines of the tea room; it must go beyond these walls before it can rightfully be called a Dao. And the Dao is not something reserved for a special time or place; it is present in all that one does. It is for precisely this reason that something so simple as pouring water over leaves can offer us the greatest of realizations. Through tea, we come to see exactly what it was all along that separated us from our true selves—the realization being that there never really was any separation at all, only the illusion of it. The Dao exists as much in the exalted as it does in the mundane; which is why a simple tea shop was my beginning, my introduction to fine tea, as well as the Dao. And it is through the Dao of tea that I find something of a companion on the long journey which brings one from the outer world to the inner one. In the end, it seems to me that that the beauty, hidden there amongst the trucks and country roads, never really was hidden—it was there all along; and what changed was not the Dao at all, it was me.

The Leaf

