

EXPLORING THE TEA MASTERS OF JAPAN, PART 2 TAKENO JOO (C. 1502– 1555)

By Aaron Fisher

Last time we began by discussing the three most important Japanese tea masters, starting with Murata Juko, who influenced the aesthetic and spirit of Japanese tea significantly. He taught his students to use tea as an expression of humility and the simplicity of a life lived from the heart, as opposed to the extravagance that surrounded tea up until that time. He took tea away from the large banquet halls to the simple study, and promoted the use of some plain, Japanese tea utensils rather than exclusively using antique Chinese teaware. Later, another master would arise to steer this raft towards its destination, tending the pole gently to guide Japanese tea towards its culmination in the third master, Sen No Rikyu, who would refine and crystallize the tea ceremony in such a lasting way that it has changed little since. Still, there is no understanding any master without understanding his tradition, so let us now turn to the life of Rikyu's master, and the second in our list of great Japanese *Chajin*: Takeno Joo.

Though not a direct student of Juko, Takeno Joo did study in the same tradition, learning tea from some of Juko's students. There isn't much historical information about Joo's early life. He was born in 1502 to a merchant family. His grandfather had been killed in the Onin War and his father had spent many years wandering before settling in Sakai where Joo was born. "Joo Ikkan Koji" was his Buddhist name when he came of age. At that time, he moved to Kyoto and took up a post as a retainer of the Udaijin Kimiyori, a post which he filled for the next fourteen years.

In early adulthood Takeno Joo was a very ardent student of the Way of Poetry. In Japan, any art might be considered spiritual as long as selflessness and purity are cultivated through its practice. In composing poems spontaneously and without the interference

of the ego, one was practicing direct communion with Nature—a process that would lead to enlightenment. The same could be said of the mastery of swordsmanship by the samurai, archery, calligraphy and even tea: the higher the mastery, the less the ego is involved, and the more one becomes but an expression of the Dao, or the Universe's artistic articulation of itself.

During Joo's youth, tea was becoming popular amongst the merchant class, in part due to the work of Juko who had made tea something that didn't require vast wealth to enjoy. By marrying the art with Zen ideals, Juko made it more appealing to scholars. This was in fact a return to the beginnings of Japanese tea, as it was brought over to Japan by Zen monks studying Buddhism in China. And it is always these spiritual roots that provide the most rewarding tea experience, then as now.



Through his literary contacts, Joo was introduced to tea some time in his twenties. He had been studying the Way of Poetry with the great master Sanjonishi Sanetaka since 1525, and through the great man had met many famous scholars, poets and thinkers of the time. At the age of 28, Joo received the transmission of his tradition from his master, which recognized his enlightenment. It was also at this time that he found and fell in love with tea, mostly through Juko's students, like Yamanaoue Soji. These students often commented that even then Joo was very wise in the way of Zen and tea. The more he practiced tea over the years, the more devoted he became. He probably never stopped composing poetry, however, later commenting that the study of poetry was as important to the Way of Tea as other arts like flower arranging.



Joo approached the tea ceremony affected by the aesthetic of the tradition of poetry he had studied. Murata Juko himself had never explicitly used the word “*wabi*”, though he implied its meaning in his tea and also in things he said, as we discussed in the previous article of this series. It was Takeno Joo who would bring that word into the realm of tea from where it had been cultivated in poetry. In the Way of Poetry, there was an aesthetic ideal of making one's poems “cool and withered”; that the barren snowdrifts on a lonely mountain were a deeper expression of poetic grace than the blossoms and aromas of spring, which masters felt were more amateur. No one knows exactly why he chose that particular word to express this growing trend towards simplicity, acceptance and imperfection, but in doing so he would forever change the tradition of tea in Japan.

As we discussed in the article about Juko, “*wabi*” was the ideal of simplicity, elegance in the natural, uncultivated peace, and would eventually influence most all of the Japanese arts. To Joo, *wabi* also meant being honest and straightforward. It meant that our communication, whether verbal, written through

poetry, or shared through a bowl of tea, was all directly from the heart—that calm center where we are all one. Juko and Joo both were practitioners of Zen and spent significant portions of their lives learning meditation. It is easy to see the aroma of Zen wafting from their ideas about tea, steeping deeply into the traditions of tea art they were creating.

Though there was now a word to describe *wabi*, one shouldn't assume that these masters felt that it was something that could be captured or conveyed in words. The tea master Sen Sotan once criticized a wealthy daimyo for serving a meager meal in rustic surroundings in order to show the master grace, as he knew he favored *wabi*. There can be no pretense. *Wabi* must come from the inside. It is not enough to secretly desire extravagance and then flaunt *wabi* to hide the fact that one can't afford the tea or teaware one desires. Nor can one with more means hide the fact by forcing simplicity where it doesn't belong, for *wabi* is a natural state. Since the true essence of *wabi* was always considered ineffable, it didn't matter that Joo had brought a word over from the Way of Poetry in order to describe it. The masters still used poems as better exemplifications of *wabi*, and as didactic tools, since a metaphor all too often captures depth and leads to experience when literal explanation fails. Takeno Joo used a classic poem to convey his understanding of *wabi*:

*Looking around,
There are neither flowers nor tinted leaves
Near the thatched hut
That stands alone by the shore
In the Autumn dusk.*

It conveys the simplicity and humility that Joo tried to advocate through tea, and will be very important in the next article in this series when we discuss Rikyu and his understanding of tea. Reflect upon it, and perhaps the meaning of *wabi* will arise in your heart, as any description here necessarily falls short.

Juko furthered the practice of incorporating local, Japanese pottery and simple, natural things in the tearoom. And Joo also advocated the use of unadorned, Japanese pottery along with Chinese treasures. In his later years, when Joo himself was a master with students of his own, he would teach more and more that the focus of the tea ceremony must be internal, and that the utensils were just expressions of this and consequently secondary. He distanced tea even more from the extravagant parties held by lords and samurai, promoting the art amongst the merchant class that he was a





part of. Tea rooms were built to resemble hermitages, made of simple materials like bamboo, thatch and plain wood. Joo began using discarded items and utensils in his tea ceremonies, arguing that the practitioner of tea must live a life of detachment from the world as much as possible, much like a Buddhist monk. In fact, Joo explicitly stated in his “Twelve Precepts” of tea that the tea person (*chajin*) should “clearly understand the precepts of Buddhism.” He suggested that to truly master the Way of Tea one must live a “quiet life in retreat.” The man of tea should be neither extravagant nor too poor, for he is not a monk. He should practice humility and simplicity in all things, not just tea.

Joo knew that every aspect of one’s life affects one’s tea, and that a mere life of 60-70 years was not enough to learn everything. One must always remain the humble beginner, with a spirit of *wabi* in all things. Here are some more of his Twelve Precepts:

“One should practice generosity and loving-kindness towards others.

One’s manners should be polite and harmonious.

One must not be critical of others or their tea ceremonies.

One must be humble, without pride.

One should not covet the utensils of others.

The tea ceremony must never be reduced to a mere appreciation of utensils.

Every tea ceremony must consider first and foremost the heart of the guests.”

All twelve, in fact, express similar sentiments—of simplicity, humility and a focus on the internal aspects of tea. He knew that the most important aspect of the tea ceremony was the mind of the participants. Nothing can affect the tea as much as the one who prepares it, and nothing can affect its preparation as much as the one who then partakes of the bowl. As it had been for thousands of years in the hands of Daoist mendicants,



tea once again became a transmission of mind—the silent wisdom of the Dao, beyond words. There is something deeply spiritual and symbolic about the fact that the master prepares a bowl steeped in his mind and then shares it with the student, who drinks deeply of that wisdom.

Out of the multitude of Joo’s contributions, his greatest, in this author’s opinion, was the idea that every aspect of one’s life must be pure if one wishes to pour wisdom through tea. Just as good tea could never be made in an unclean vessel, I don’t think an impure mind can brew great tea either. Joo taught that it was not enough to clean the tearoom and prepare the tea in the correct way, and that one had to practice the principles of tea in all of one’s affairs, great or small. Every as-



pect of one’s life—one’s job, diet, morality, meditation, etc.—all greatly affect the quality of the tea ceremony. I have found that this is one of the greatest treasures of my tea studies, and am so grateful this wisdom found me. Tea has taught me so much about how to live life, how to treat others, and how to commune with Nature. Joo listened to the Leaf, knowing that it would whisper the Way to him; and that Way was a lifestyle.

Joo was also critical of the way some people collected expensive teaware and then became very greedy, envious and judgmental of other people’s performance. He knew that speaking of another person’s tea in a negative way only harms one’s own tea and is a reflection of

one’s understanding. If tea only serves to cultivate envy, greed, or judgment of others—no matter how poorly they make tea—it is in fact leading away from the Dao. There is no need to have the greatest, most expensive antique, especially if one feels craving and greed for it. Do you see good tea and wish to possess it? Can you enjoy the antiques of a friend without desiring to have them as your own? Also, no matter what practice of tea another person has, one mustn’t be critical—leave them their tea. It is a hard lesson to learn: that there is no “right” way to brew tea, and that we must never speak ill of another person’s tea, as that gossip reflects our own lack more than those we gossip about.



Master Joo followed his own advice and retired from his position as a retainer after fourteen years service and moved back to Sakai to live in peace and quiet. I imagine he spent his days writing calligraphy, meditating and drinking tea amongst the serenity of some untamed garden, as free and spontaneous as his boundless spirit. The vision alone stills my very soul.

Joo passed away from natural causes in 1555 at the age of 53, though the lasting impression he made on the tea world, particularly regarding “*wabi chanoyu*” would last up until the present.

In the next article we will discuss the greatest master of the three, Rikyu. The teachings Juko and Joo had cultivated would reach fruition through him. All three of these teachers have much to offer the modern tea drinker, no matter what kind of tea one enjoys. Like any great master, their art is timeless. Joo knew that a real bowl of tea must be poured by a pure mind, full of compassion and loving-kindness. Let us then honor him by cultivating these principals in our tea practice.

The Leaf



“To have the spirit of inner solitariness (*sabi*) is fitting; it accords with the Way of Tea. When one seeks to perform with beauty, it becomes mere finery and turns effete; when one seeks an air of *wabi*, it becomes shabby. Both beauty and *wabi* are present in disclosing the solitariness of things. Be attentive to this.”

—Takeno Joo, translated by Dennis Hirota—

