

VEGETABLE TEA

By Thomas Leons

I am very fortunate that my teachers have always taught me that it is not enough for us to sit quietly in our tea rooms enjoying ourselves, ignoring the environmental issues involved in tea farming, other aspects of our lives, or the way we treat others. The great tea masters of Japan also always spoke about the fact that a 'man of tea' (*chajin*) practices tea in all his affairs. The single most important element in preparing tea is not the pot, the cups or the tea sink—it isn't even the tea leaves. The most important part of any tea session anywhere is the mind of the ones preparing and enjoying the tea.


Our minds are affected by everything we do throughout the day. If we have a hectic, angry morning and our mind is ruffled, it will affect our tea, just as it would affect the painter's art. This doesn't mean we shouldn't brew tea when we aren't calm, quite the opposite, in fact, since tea has the amazing ability to create calmness and even resolve disputes. It means that as we progress we come to understand that our ability to enjoy and master tea is affected by everything we are and all that we do.

There must come a time when we have learned enough about the kinds of tea and the ways they are processed. We also know a lot about how to brew tea: what amount to put in, what temperature water to use, etc. At that point, the wise person realizes that the only aspect of the tea left to improve, at the end of the day, is him or herself. Just as those who wish to make of tea nothing but business will have liquor that tastes of coin, those who abuse others and carry angry minds will also never experience the deep quietude inherent in tea, however much it alleviates their mind on the surface.

To be a 'man of tea' means that we must also purify other aspects of our lives, and there is no more concrete place to start with than our diets. Of course, your diet will affect your sensitivity towards a beverage that you also consume. It seems obvious that what you eat will affect your palate, digestion, consciousness and consequently your ability (or lack thereof) to experience the subtler flavors, aromas and sensations in a tea.

There are many, very good reasons why meditators from various spiritual traditions have always promoted a healthy, light vegetarian diet. Eating meat is heavier, duller and often dims the senses. After eating a lot of meat we feel sleepy, and our senses are murky. The greatest, most sensitive tea masters I've met were almost all vegetarians. It is very difficult to develop the sensitivity to experience the subtlest aspects of tea, like its Qi, while eating meat because the very nature of that sensitivity denies one's ability to ignore the negative affects a poor diet is having on one's body.





Beyond that, this extends to junk food as well. Eating lots of fast food creates an overweight and unhealthy body, which quite obviously leads to a lack of sensitivity. If one were sensitive of the body, then obviously one would experience the detrimental effects the junk food was having on one's overall health. Similarly, one cannot expect to eat 2 burgers, fries and drink a huge soda and then go to drink a fine tea and notice all the textures and complexity available in its liquor.

Having had profoundly serene experiences and found connection to the Dao through tea, it would be impossible for one to then walk out of that room and live the rest of one's life in unhealthy ways; for in essence, the one who wasn't transformed by an experience of transcendence as such couldn't have had a very deep experience. Once one truly experiences the harmony of a life lived naturally, healthy and with the



Dao, living otherwise becomes all that much more uncomfortable now that one is hyper-sensitive of the subtle differences in one's being caused by things like diet, environment, stress, etc.

The more subtle our minds become, the more we realize the simple truth that we are what we eat, as much as what we drink, and so much of our connection to tea comes through the very fact that it is "consumed", combining with and becoming a part of us. We are becoming the tea, as we drink it, and it is also becoming us. The same is true for what we eat.

On the deepest, subtlest level we come to find a sense of connection to all things in the world. We realize that the death of animals brings with it tremendous amounts of anger and fear. Just as when we are afraid, the animals' heart rates rise, their bodies tremble, hormones like adrenaline are released in the brains and blood—their entire physical structure is altered by this mortal terror. When we consume their flesh, we also




consume this Qi. The more and more one connects to one's body and Qi, whether through tea, meditation or another technique, the more sensitive one becomes to the differences that are caused by putting different things into our bodies.

People often ask how to develop their palate and become sensitive to subtler flavors, aromas, sensations in the mouth and eventually Qi in the body; they wish to be sensitive to the variations different teas cause in their bodies on the subtlest levels in other words. But you can't have one without the other. You can't spend a few hours in a heightened state, fully aware of the most minute changes happening in your body as a result of drinking some tea and then get up and in that ultra-receptive mindset go to the nearest fast food joint and swallow a bunch of poisonous garbage.

Despite my personal feelings, this isn't meant to be an ethical sermon on the problems I have with meat. Remaining true to topic, I will, however, restate that the vast majority of the greatest, most sensitive tea drinkers that I have met on my journey through tea were all vegetarian. They all had their reasons, but it usually was a decision that wasn't based on ethical issues or beliefs in a religion or teacher, but because the very sensitivity that makes them what they are also allows them glimpses of the negative influence meat has on their body and mind on subtle levels. There are exceptions now as there always have been. Some groups of tea lovers in Asia have also documented the impressions of hundreds of individuals experimenting with vegetarianism for the first time, and found the same results. I am also not trying to write a polemic





against the meat industry, but merely to suggest that you try eating less or no meat and see what affect this dietary change has on your ability to appreciate tea.

As with all forms of experiential wisdom, it is best if one experiment for oneself. I always suggest to people that they try vegetarianism for a period of six months. After all, no words can ever really suffice for experience. If one cannot set meat down for a few months even, what a terrible attachment this greed has become. And if, after a few months one finds that the experience of so many meditators and tea drinkers was in fact wrong; if one finds that one's body, mental state and even ability to discriminate tea have not improved at all, then meat will still be there, waiting. There will be no shortage of meat at the supermarket, restaurant or fast food joint when one's experiment is finished.

And then, at least, one will know for sure that all the fuss was just that.

The fact is, though, that a vegetarian diet is light, healthy and often so much cleaner. It helps our mind to remain sharp, our bodies clean and also promotes a discipline over the senses that is a virtue in most all approaches to life. Some masters in Asia suggest that you can't truly plumb the depths of tea without refraining from things that dull the sense like meat, junk food, alcohol, drugs, etc. I personally wouldn't stretch the argument to such an extreme. Instead, I suggest you try experimenting yourself to see how your diet affects your ability to relax and enjoy tea, your sensitivity and overall health.

The Leaf

