

EXPLORING THE TEA MASTERS OF JAPAN

MURATA JUKO (C. 1421–1502)

BY AARON FISHER

As Japan developed its own tea aesthetic, culture and spiritual wisdom, three masters would stand out as potent forces in the progress of the Japanese tea ceremony known as “*chanoyu*”. Of course, just as in the artistic and spiritual traditions of China, Korea and other places tea found root; many aspects of culture, philosophy, religion, aesthetics as well as countless individuals would influence the maturity of a unique Japanese tea. Still, amongst those many tea men, Murata Juko, Takeno Joo and Sen Rikyu stand out like the brightest, richest leaves in a heap of finished tea. Partly due to circumstantial fame, the honor of years of scholarship, and partly because of the real impact they had on tea in Japan, any study of *chanoyu* must include a survey of these three legendary men. For that reason, let us pass over each of them and discuss the ways in which they channeled the Way of Tea (Cha Dao), one at a time successively over the coming issues of *The Leaf*—starting chronologically here with Murata Juko.

No one knows exactly when tea reached Japan, but the earliest mention was in 814 by the Shingon monk Kukai, who—like many Buddhists of the day—had traveled to China to study from the great *Chan* (Zen) masters there. For ages, Daoist and then Buddhist mendicants had woven tea into their daily spiritual practice, using it in offerings, to keep awake during vigils, and even to transmit wisdom from master to pupil. Almost all of the best and most famous teas in China originate on mountains where monasteries are located, and most of the original cultivators of tea were monks and nuns. Sometimes the locations were even chosen because of deep-rooted, wild and powerful tea trees; other times, the monks brought the plants with them. It’s no wonder, then, that those traveling in search of insight would also include tea wisdom in the legacy they brought back and propagated in Japan.

Another important stop we must briefly make, before turning to Murata Juko and his influence on tea in Japan, is of course Esai. Eisai was born in Kibitsu, Bitchu Province, in 1141. Very early on he showed an



inclination for things spiritual, searching for answers in the Buddhist tradition that was really beginning to flourish at the time. Like many before him, Esai’s quest led him to mainland China. In 1168, at the age of 27, he traveled to Song China and studied Chan Buddhism on mount Tian Tai. Within the year, he returned to Japan a changed man. After a second visit of four years, Esai returned home to stay, bringing with him scriptures, wisdom and tea plants. He set about proselytizing the Japanese to the Tendai Buddhist teachings and the benefits of tea, as well as founding the Rinzai Sect with equal verve. The tea plants he brought were transplanted in Uji, where—according to legend—they populated the region, still famous for its green tea today. He also wrote the book *Drinking Tea for Health* (*Kissa Yojoki*), which focused on tea mostly as a medicinal panacea, useful for extending life and treating a wondrous variety of ailments.

For some time, the rarity of tea in Japan limited its use to the monks who tended it in their gardens and the very rich who could afford it. The former

Chanoyu
Should be made with the heart,
Not with the hand.
Make it without making it,
In the stillness of your mind.
— Hamamoto Soshun —

continued the traditions of tea and spirituality established in China over thousands of years of tea consumption. The royalty and newly-founded military class, on the other hand, quickly developed a tea culture based on art and entertainment. They threw extravagant tea parties that were often really games and/or contests to guess a tea's origins or quality, often winning prizes the host and guests both provided. These were usually just occasions to eat decadent food, display large quantities of expensive art and artifacts—which were almost exclusively Chinese antiques or master-crafted pieces of jade, ceramics, paintings, etc. that were rare and expensive—and often ended in debauchery and drinking.

Overcoming this profane approach to tea, our three masters and the times they found themselves in would go on to shed such casual extravagance and develop a very rich and deep spirit of tea. Whereas the warrior class was concerned only with the taste of tea and the sensory enjoyment, not poetic or spiritual insight, these masters would turn away from the sensual impressions of tea, forming a tea culture inspired by the inner world of tea experience.

Wabi

As mentioned before, the various influences that combined to form the traditional Japanese tea ceremony are complicated and vast enough for a library of scholarship. Many such historians say that the Way of Tea was a ripe fruit waiting to be plucked when Murata Juko came into the garden (*roji*). Prior to him, other Zen monks like the famous Shinkei (1406-75) had found ways to integrate various art forms and spirituality. Shinkei used poetry not just as an expression of spiritual insights, but as a path to such wisdom itself. In other words, in creating and refining one's poetic impulses and achieving mastery, one also learned truths about oneself, life and ultimately spiritual enlightenment. Another example from the time was the way *No*-theater actors trained to be selfless and detached,



amongst other insights, during performances. At the time of Shinkei, the aesthetic ideal of those using art as an expression of, and the very path (Dao) itself, began to lean more and more towards what they called “cool” and “withered”, meaning that the highest levels of mastery in these arts (and spiritual traditions) were not the verdure of summer gardens, or the art it inspired, but the “lonely hut by the seaside” and the “grass peaking through the snow of a barren mountain landscape.”

Before the Muromachi Era (1392-1568) the word ‘*Wabi*’ was negative and was used to express heartache, desolation or loneliness. During the time of Juko and Joo, the word took on a new positive meaning based on the trend of ‘withered’ and ‘cool’ that had been developing for some time. The influence of Zen on the culture, spirituality and tea of the times cast new light on simplicity, renunciation and emptiness. Being alone and empty was an expression of beauty. *Wabi* came to mean an imperfection in the tea aesthetic, so that the tea room was built from simple, rustic materials like tatami and wood. *Wabi* also was an attitude of unpretentiousness, simplicity and direct communication of the heart. Through simplicity and emptiness, even tea can be transcendent and lead to enlightening insight. The idea of *Wabi* will become more important when we discuss Joo, and we can therefore explore it in more detail at that time.





Murata Juko

There are many stories and myths about Murata Juko, but little historical information has survived. Most scholars agree that he was born in Nara around 1421. Some stories suggest that he was the son of a traveling, blind story-teller/priest, a common occupation during those times. Apparently, he was dissatisfied with the ‘World of Dust’, and at the age of just eleven entered a local temple as a novice in the Pure Land Buddhist sect. However, some time later, while he was still a young man, he was dismissed from the monastery for neglecting his duties and studies. Juko had found another passion: tea.

Juko began spending all of his time attending tea competitions and learning about tea from local teachers. After he was sent away from the temple, he decided to devote his life to tea. He traveled to Kyoto, maybe to get a job as a merchant or trader of some kind. He began spending all his money collecting antique teaware from China and spreading tea culture amongst the merchant class there. His personal life at that time revolved around tea and the collection of more and more extravagant pieces of teaware.

At some time during his adult life, Murata Juko returned to the spiritual sentiments he had started life with. Perhaps the tea had taught him lessons, sitting alone beneath a pine tree on some hill and listening to the kettle sough. He started studying Zen under the renowned master Ikkyu, who has an important part in



Japanese history in his own right. Of course, Juko’s tea was affected more and more by the insights he discovered in meditation and vice versa. As a result, he completely changed the way tea poured through his life.

It was common for higher class people of Juko’s time to have a small study built into their house with a shelving unit on which they would display their antiques. The room usually had a small table, writing instruments and other scholarly or poetic decorations.

They often served what was called ‘*shoin*-style tea’, in which one drank tea in these small rooms with brightly colored walls and displayed one’s treasures to guests. Juko began a trend moving away from this excess that would continue after his death, perhaps culminating in the tea of Rikyu. He decreased the size of the tea room to four and a half mats of tatami, and began taking out or simplifying many of the decorations. Juko also began to use more rustic, local materials. The upper classes of his time were still passionate about all things

Chinese, which would continue after his death, but he was planting the seeds that would lead future tea lovers to seek out and find the beauty in simplicity, combining Japanese teaware with the expensive, imported pieces from China and Korea.

Juko is often attributed as the founder of the “thatched hut” style of tea since he invented the four-and-one-half-mat room, the sunken hearth and the incorporation of more simple materials in the construction of the tea room. As Juko simplified his decorations, tea sessions began to incorporate less utensils and art,



often just revolving around a single scroll painting. With less utensils, the highly-formalized ‘*shoin*-style tea’ became plainer and simpler to perform. Juko still kept his collection of rare and treasured Chinese pieces, but began surrounding them with simple bamboo or other natural materials. He is most famous for saying that tea was “a fine steed tethered to a thatched hut”, suggesting that by contrasting local implements with fine Chinese ones, the practitioner could achieve the “cool”, “withered” aesthetic of Zen art. The idea wasn’t to create contrast, but harmony between the beautiful and plain in the way a flower garden or some mountain scenery does.

Of all Juko’s contributions to tea, especially as he taught more and more in his older years, his greatest influence was to promote the idea that tea and Zen were the same, “The flavor of tea is the flavor of Zen.” He began to view tea as a Way (Dao). His blooming ideals of *Wabi* were a big part of this inspiration. He is quoted as saying, “The moon not glimpsed through rifts in clouds holds no interest”, meaning that the pure, bright full moon that was the symbol of enlightenment in many Buddhist traditions wasn’t as elegant or expressive as the partially obscured moon—that we find

perfection in the imperfect, embrace the discordance in life to achieve concordance, and so on. Tea to Juko was more than just guests and hosts sharing time together; it was a poetic expression of human experience that, if performed properly, could achieve wisdom. As one devotes oneself to the formalities and movements of the tea ceremony there is an immersion in the simple, humble aspects of daily living that can encourage emptiness and freedom from mind and ego, beyond the trappings of worldly existence. One finds the “formless in the form” of the teaware, tea and even the silent communication between the participants.

Only a few scattered letters attributed to Juko remain: the *Letter on Heart’s Mastery*, a few responses to questions posed by students and some records kept by others, during his time and later, of his teachings. The *Letter on Heart’s Mastery* poignantly admonishes students of tea to remain humble and selfless, as progress on the Way is hindered by attachment and self-satisfaction. He often suggests that one’s manner should be “natural and unobtrusive.” He also recommends that guest and host both clear their minds when entering the tea room so that tea can be an expression of silence: pure and simple.

From the moment you enter the dewy path until it is time to say your goodbye, you should esteem your host with the utmost respect, in the true spirit that this very encounter will occur but once in your lives.

— Murata Juko —



the same, like two mountain trails leading to the same temple. In ancient times it was always assumed that the Way (Dao) was really thousands of smaller eddies flowing on in one great river, and that no two people or situations would ever require the same approach to achieve a union with that great flow. Consequently, the Daoist would say that different times and places require different movements to bring man in touch with himself and Nature, and neither is more or less valuable.

Though I myself practice more Chinese than Japanese tea, I often drink deeply of the wisdom offered by Japanese tea masters like Murata Juko. Most importantly, I respect the idea that silence is integral to a happy, healthy human life, as well as true tea appreciation. It is possible to enjoy company and friendship through tea, but true contact with the subtle flavors, aromas and sensations of a tea can't happen when one is chatting. Jean Arp said "Soon silence will have passed into legend. Man has turned his back on silence", and I think his prediction has in fact come true in these bustling, noisy times. More than ever we need to learn from the tea masters of Japan and devote some part of our day to a time for silence, basking in the wisdom and tranquility it can immerse us in.

Cha Dao

While most nations went on to develop their own tea culture, they are all also related to their source in the mountains of China. Authors often incorrectly suggest that Japan was the only culture to develop a spiritual approach to tea. Actually, China and Korea also have strong traditions of using tea as part of or the focus of a spiritual life. In China, tea began thousands of years ago as a meditation and medicine, first by shamans and then later by Daoist and Buddhist monks. What was unique in Japan was the method, not the idea. Chinese Cha Dao has always placed greater emphasis on the Leaf itself and the dialogue between man and Nature that tea can inspire, teaching us to live in concordance with ourselves and the Way. On the other hand, the Japanese tea ceremony, beginning with Murata Juko, was focused less on the Leaf and more on the ceremony itself. Through a balance of repetition and spontaneity achieved over years of practice, one might still the mind, achieving equanimity and insight into one's true nature. The results of these different paths are

The Leaf

Join me next time as we explore the life and teachings of Takeno Joo.



'Ascend' by Jeffrey McCloud