



No Method

By Thomas Leons @ Wu De

The human element in tea is often the least discussed. It is perhaps more interesting and definitely easier to give advice about teaware or preparation methodology. And yet we can learn so much from the place where who we are as living beings meets the tea session as leaves and water prepared together—the place in which tea becomes the master and we the students. The effects an antique cup or pot are having on the tea liquor is something we can discuss and demonstrate, even to beginners. The ways in which the mind is changing our experience of tea and the tea space, on the other hand, leaves the hobbyist behind, entering the *Zendo*, where taking tea is part of a practice. Never underestimate the effects your approach and intention are having on your tea.

In fact, all tea experiments are like those studies in physics where the subatomic activities behave as a particle or wave depending upon how you approach and conduct your studies. It's all in the mind, in other words. Sometimes, people apply spotlight consciousness to tea and criticize the idea that Silver kettles improve water, that antique Yixing are better, etc. suggesting that we conduct some sort of experiment involving blinds and control groups. The problem is that no matter which way such an experiment goes, it only applies to that setting and style of tea. We have tried some similar experiments, and had some success (as we discussed in our article about silver kettles), but as such they were far from conclusive. And more importantly, we'd like to suggest that even if they were decisive, that

also wouldn't matter. We write out of enjoyment and a desire to share tea wisdom, and our opinions aren't meant to be anyone's gospel. On the other hand, we would never advocate unfounded learning, which too often gets one lost and leads to irreverence. Saying that different methods are mostly in the mind, and that opinions are just opinions without real gravity does not mean you should therefore avoid finding a master—having a Way (Dao), even if it is but one of many, is still better than being directionless simply because you recognize that all expertise is relative.

Tea drinking happens in the body and spirit, and where your mind is as you enjoy it is far more influential than any so-called “objective” truths found out through tea research (tsiology) of any kind. If, for example, a large study proved that antique Yixing actually had no chemical effect on tea, but you found great joy in appreciating them and even after reading the article continued to find your tea more delicious and deeper, would you stop using them? As an analogy, what if an article appeared in your local newspaper detailing a study in which a large group of people unanimously picked restaurant A over restaurant B, which happened to be your favorite. Curious, you went out to try the newer A a few times, but found that you still preferred B—the ambience, food and friendly waitress all making for a much better experience for you. Would you then assume that some kind of objective conclusion had been reached through that study and it was therefore time for you to stop visiting your favorite restaurant? Of course not, for you would know that every person has different tastes, relative to factors as arbitrary as the weather, diet, Qi, exercise, particular sensitivity to certain flavors and a million other subtle factors. In the same way, there is no way to objectify tea preparation and argue convincingly for any type of teaware, method of preparation or kind of tea, since all of this is relative to season, occasion, individual idiosyncrasies, situations and environments.

The role your mindset and approach to tea has on the liquor that results is really everything. Tea was used by aboriginal shamans and later Daoists, drunk alone in the mountains, as a commune with Nature and a way of communicating with spirits and divinities. Monks in the Tang Dynasty wandered the mountains preparing caked tea by boiling it so simply, with leaves and teaware so very different from what we drink today and much more like a bitter soup. Without any of the art—any of the subtleties of pots, cups and kettles, water temperature or pouring methods—their simple

bowls of tea brought them to the heights of awareness, so much so that they began offering tea to the Buddha as a testament of their reverence for the Leaf, an herb as sacred as the incense, flowers and even the more permanent offerings on the alter. The reverence they brought to their tea mattered more than the differences in tea and teaware, preparation and technique. How they applied the stimulus mattered more than understanding the chemical caffeine.

The approach you take to your tea has more effect on the experience than anything else. You can, if you wish, analyze and deconstruct tea into lifeless chemicals. You can turn tea preparation into a hobby and explore all the types of teawares and variables in temperature, etc. acting as if the results were somehow objective and then discuss the conclusions with a group of like-minded tea lovers with great, big smiles of joy on the faces of everyone present. The hobbyist game, is just one game of many, though; and for all its attempts at taking itself seriously, it really is just “like putting ants in leaf boats and pretending you're fighting a war”, as Zhou Yu put it. After all the experiments and friendly debate about a certain tea, teaware or method of preparation you may one day find yourself having the shattering experience of some simple green tea boiled in a dirty old kettle in the mountains with a Zen master—and as you relax into the fresh air, mountain vistas and a rising sense of peace the likes of which you haven't felt in a long time, you realize that this tea is surprisingly more delicious than the last five hundred sessions you had in the city with all the pretension of certain pots, cups, leaves and methods all attached to with a degree of snobbery such a master monk would only grin at.

There is nothing wrong with games. We all must play. It is a part of life, indeed. Without play and humor people end up taking themselves far too seriously. The size of this universe, if not life itself, adumbrates even the greatest of human endeavors with a ridiculous duckbill-shaped shadow—goofy and silly hand gestures laughing away all we do. It is great fun to play tea: to buy a new pot and see what effect it has on your tea, pour the same tea into two cups and see which one is better, see what difference having tea on the floor cross-legged has, read some insights on Zen and tea and see if you can meditate through tea, prepare a *cha xi* complete with a beautiful tea cloth, flower arrangement and a scroll in the alcove, etc.—the kinds of games are as infinite as the imagination. And all of these things lend tea the great sense of enjoyment it brings to us all. Then we also turn tea into social games, discussing and



debating the merits of certain teas, teawares and production or preparation methodology. It's great fun to have a cup with some other tea lovers and discuss our opinions together. At other times, we sit silently and loosen our grip on reality letting the awareness the tea brings to become a part of a meditative and life-changing stream.

All these approaches and ways of playing are fun and great, so long as they bring joy and are recognizably aspects of ourselves at rest, spending our leisure time doing what we enjoy. In other words, they aren't to be taken too seriously. Observing yourself and others, it is easy to see that as soon as a certain tradition, opinion or method is taken to be the “best” or “objective truth”, the whole tea space surrounding that particular game becomes tense and lacks the joy and grace of other, freer tea spaces. (Remember playing games or sports as a kid? It was always ruined the moment it got too serious.)

We aren't suggesting there aren't any objective, agreeable truths in tea, either, but simply that they don't matter. You don't cease enjoying movies or novels because they don't have historicity. The stories move

us, and we participate in them, at least emotionally. When we come into a beautiful tea room, with flowers, a scroll, incense and quiet music we have separated ourselves from our normal humdrum lives. When the Song poets, and Japanese literati who mimicked them, built their gardens and tea huts in the style of the real mendicants of the distant mountains, they knew that even a busy merchant needs a time and space for repose—where he can, even for just an hour, relax into Nature and breathe in the same freedom the hermits enjoy.

Find the place where your life meets your tea. In what ways does your approach affect your tea? How many approaches have you tried? Have you had the same tea in different environments with different people and different teaware? What was the difference? Where and when was your absolute best tea experience? What made it different from your worst?

Do what makes your tea better. Find the place in which your mind influences your tea. If you really want to enhance your tea, find ways to enhance your outlook and approach to tea in general. Such changes will not only bring far greater joy to your tea sessions than any change in water or teaware could, but they

will also further blur that line where tea and life meet—effecting change in your personality and life. Relax into the fact that there is no “tea truth” worth clinging to; and that the way you make tea, the leaves you consider to be the highest quality—every aspect of your tea, in fact—will always be growing and changing, and that you’ll look back in five years and wonder how you could have possibly enjoyed tea the way you are now, or perhaps even wonder why you enjoyed tea at all. Be cautious about the sincerity with which you argue your opinions, since you’ll find they’ve changed a bit down the road.

In such a freedom from tea, the game of role-playing, creating settings that inspire a connection to Nature or to the past glories of Asian culture, perhaps the chance of an empty space to drink of Zen—all of the greatest joys in this art we all love become so much more accessible. Even the debates that ensue are much more fun when we know that no one’s feelings will get hurt, no one will get angry, because none of us are taking ourselves or our opinions seriously. For us there is

nothing more paramount to our lives than our meditation, tea and spiritual selves. And yet, even for those of us practicing Cha Dao with the utmost devotion and dedication to a life of tea, we must also, as Master Lin says, “learn to laugh at our own craziness.” In fact, Master Lin’s studio, more of a *Zendo* than a home, is called “*Wu Min Tsai*”, which is difficult to translate but suggests: “The place where one please mustn’t bring any craziness”. He says that he most humbly asks us all to come to him free of all wacky insanity, since “I have enough to fill the room and more!” He exclaims. And the smile that quickly spreads across everyone’s face as they pass beneath the sign on the way in means that people enter with a casual laughter and relaxing grace that begins every tea session in just the right way.

