

# *Art*

## **Zen and the Art of Tea**

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The essence of the tea ceremony  
Is simply to boil water,  
To make tea,  
And to drink it—nothing more!  
Be sure you know this.<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese tea ceremony, *cha no yu*, is an integral part of Japanese history. Dating to the 16th century, it has remained an important part of the culture. Tea came to Japan through a Zen monk, Eisai Zenji, who studied in China and brought tea seeds back to his native country in 1191.<sup>2</sup> The tea ceremony itself took on multiple forms and was adopted by many groups in Japan. In order to understand fully the tea ceremony, it is essential to know about its history and the Buddhist traditions behind it.

The history of Buddhism in Japan can be seen through the development of different strands of the religion. Zen Buddhism developed in Japan and corresponds to the Chinese strand, Chan Buddhism. Buddhism is a very pragmatic religion. It does not focus on the origin of human life, nor does it deify any being, as do many religions. It focuses on the individual's journey to enlightenment, and it observes everyday life with great detail. When Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it had to contend with the beliefs and traditions that were already in place. But because Buddhism is centered on the individual's path to enlightenment rather than on a deity, it was able to blend and coexist with other traditions. As the Japanese people adopted Buddhism, different branches developed which concentrated on specific aspects of the religion. One of these groups was Zen Buddhism.

Zen is not an easily explained religion. At times it seems elusive or contradictory. It differs from other types of Buddhism by focusing on the individual's inner spiritual experience, and on achieving *satori*.<sup>3</sup> *Satori* is "the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind."<sup>4</sup> In Western terms, *satori* is referred to as enlightenment. Zen aims to achieve a "lack of supposition" by clearing and shutting down the conscious mind and allowing the unconscious to take over.<sup>5</sup> According to D. T. Suzuki, consciousness can only supply us with a limited amount of perceptions and images whereas the unconscious contains an "un glimpsable completeness

of all subliminal psychic factors.” If one is able to empty the conscious mind, the unconscious receives more energy and its contents can break through to consciousness.<sup>6</sup> To accomplish this goal, one must discipline his mind, and work toward achieving enlightenment.

The basic idea of Zen is to get in touch with the inner workings of the self in the most direct way.<sup>7</sup> Zen does not worship any images, not even the Buddha. Followers are not taught to meditate and concentrate on any one thing. Thoughts should be fixed on nothing.<sup>8</sup> Zen aims to achieve an inner spiritual experience and believes in the inner purity of man.<sup>9</sup> It finds “an inexpressibly deep thought even in holding up a finger, or in saying a ‘good morning’ to a friend casually met on the street.”<sup>10</sup> This concept informs the Japanese tea ceremony. Every movement and every object is treated with the utmost importance.

Originating in China, tea was initially used for medicinal purposes and eventually became a beverage.<sup>11</sup> About A.D. 770, Lu Yü assembled Ch’a ching (Tea classic) which designated the twenty-four utensils to be used in preparing and drinking tea, as well as types of water to use.<sup>12</sup> He also included historical records and the medicinal powers of tea.<sup>13</sup> His writings laid the foundation for later generations. When tea was brought to Japan by Zen monks, they used it to stay awake during long meditations. Zen teachings emphasize that everyone can achieve enlightenment, but mundane thoughts stifle it. They believe that enlightenment can be found in the midst of everyday activities. Drinking tea therefore was like a kind of “meditation in action.”<sup>14</sup>

In time, the tea ceremony became popular among the wealthy. Elaborate tea ceremonies and tournaments were held which were often accompanied by prizes and alcohol.<sup>15</sup> This was not, however, what the true spirit of the tea ceremony was about. A famous tea master, Sen no Rikyu (1522-91) helped to direct the tea ceremony back toward its original purpose. Rikyu was from a merchant family and eventually became tea master and confidant to some of Japan’s powerful rulers.<sup>16</sup> In his tea practice Rikyu focused on the aesthetic of modesty, refinement, and rusticity.<sup>17</sup> A small group of people entered a modestly sized rustic room, drank tea delicately prepared in front of them, and quietly discussed the tea utensils or a piece of Zen artwork in the room.<sup>18</sup> The tea room was small and provided a retreat from the outside world. Rikyu brought the ceremony back to its Zen roots. Participants were able to contemplate the deeper meaning of the tea ceremony, instead of being part of a large spectacle.

The tea ceremony requires specific utensils and promotes an introspective state of mind. Everything in the teahouse is stripped to the bare necessities. One example is the Tai-an Tearoom, built by Sen no Rikyu (Fig. 1). The tearoom is very small and simple. Thick straw mats, called tatami, lie on the floor. The house is constructed of natural materials, such as wood

and bamboo. The walls appear worn with age, and there is a small alcove, or tokonoma. Typically the tokonoma holds a piece of art, like a Zen scroll, or a basic flower arrangement. The room provides no distractions or anxiety for the participants. It is merely a space to accommodate the tea ceremony.

The ceremony utensils are given great importance. Each utensil, the water pot, the kettle, the bamboo spoon, the whisk, and the tea bowl are related to tea and are highly prized. The instruments are not chosen for their utility, but for their simplicity and natural beauty. They are works of art that are collected for their aesthetic and historical value.<sup>19</sup> Vessels that are misshapen or that evoke nature are favored by tea masters. They are an expression of the Japanese philosophical and aesthetic principles, wabi and sabi. Wabi and sabi are the appreciation and value found in that which is old and weathered. The tea ceremony itself involves several specific steps that have been perfected over many years to eliminate all excess movements. The guests approach the tea house through a pristine outer garden, transporting them from the material world to the spiritual realm of the tea room.<sup>20</sup> In the garden, the guests pause to rinse their hands and mouth to get rid of any spiritual impurities. Many tea houses have a small door so that everyone must crawl through the entrance. This serves as an act of humility and suggests that everyone is of the same status in the tea house. Upon entering, the guests pause to admire the artwork in the tokonoma, which has been specifically selected by the host to establish the mood.<sup>21</sup> After greeting everyone, the host builds a fire for the tea kettle. While the tea is being prepared, the guests admire and comment on the utensils and the artwork. Every movement of the host is premeditated and precise as he prepares the tea.<sup>22</sup> It is also common for the guest to receive either a formal meal or something sweet while the tea is being prepared. The taste of something sweet provides contrast to the bitterness of the tea. Once the tea is ready, the host bows and places the tea bowl before each guest. The guest bows back, turns the bowl slightly as a sign of respect, and finishes the tea in 3 ½ sips.<sup>23</sup> Once all have finished their tea, the ceremony comes to an end.

The Japanese applied all three aspects of tea when it was introduced into their culture: medicinal, social, and devotional. The tea ceremony mainly appeals to the social and devotional sides of tea. The emphasis of the ceremony is on “natural, serene, purposeless human activity.”<sup>24</sup> The tea master is able to create simplicity through formality, by following the prescribed steps that have been passed down for centuries. The ceremony is refined “to become a tool for arousing awareness and inner peace so that eventually, through care and repetition, wisdom may arise.”<sup>25</sup> The setting is uncluttered and simple, and the guests are familiar with the process. They are able to relax and settle into a meditative state of mind. The ideas of wabi and sabi are infused in every aspect of the ritual. These principles direct participants to “go beyond worldly

attachments to achieve compassion for others and an honest appraisal of the way things are.”<sup>26</sup> Through the simple, peaceful environment and the repetition of established actions, guests of the tea ceremony can reach a Zen-like state. Through the monks who brought tea seeds to Japan and the spreading of Buddhism throughout Asia, tea and Zen have become strongly entwined. The tea ceremony cannot be wholly appreciated without an understanding of Zen Buddhism. Zen is infused into every aspect of the tea ceremony. Though many Japanese traditions, such as Ikebana and haiku, have been translated into other countries, there is no equivalent to the tea ceremony. It is a tradition rooted deeply in the Japanese culture and requires insight not only in Zen philosophy, but also in ceramics, garden architecture, and cultural traditions. The tea ceremony played an important role in ancient times and is still significant today.



Figure 1- Tai-an Tearoom, Sen no Rikyu.  
Endnotes

- 1 The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life, p. 41.
- 2 Japanese Tea Bowls, p. 34.
- 3 An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, p.88.
- 4 Ibid, p.88.
- 5 Ibid, p.21-23.
- 6 Ibid, p.21-23.
- 7 Ibid, p.44.
- 8 Ibid, p.41.
- 9 Ibid, p.34, 40.
- 10 An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, p.34
- 11 The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life, p. 43.
- 12 Ibid, p.44.
- 13 Ibid, p.44.
- 14 Ibid, p.45.
- 15 Ibid, p.45.
- 16 Ibid, p.46.
- 17 Art History: A View of the World, p.858.
- 18 Ibid, p.858.
- 19 Japanese Tea Bowls, p.42.
- 20 Chanoyu, The Way of Tea, p.64
- 21 Japanese Tea Bowls, p.41.
- 22 Ibid, p.42.
- 23 Learning the Spirit Behind the Ritual of the Japanese Tea Ceremony,  
p. B2.
- 24 The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life, p. 43.
- 25 Shaw, Introduction to Buddhist Meditation p.251.
- 26 Chanoyu, The Way of Tea, p.63

#### Works Cited

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