
Time for Tea: The Embodiment of Zen

Art and Design

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Abstract

Author and Zen Abbot John Daido Looi asks us to “imagine a universe in which all things have a mutual identity. They all have an interdependent origination: when one thing arises, all things rise simultaneously. Everything, also, has a mutual causality: what happens to one thing happens to the universe. Imagine a universe in which all the parts and totality are a single entity; all of the pieces and the whole thing are, at once, one thing” (Looi XI). The absolute conception of Zen is extremely complicated. There is no single definition that can do the term justice (Cunningham 1-3). However, Zen can be understood by experiencing it through what is known as the Japanese Tea Ceremony. The idea of Zen is inseparable from this tea ceremony, however, the formation of this combination was a long process.

The origin of this phenomena is as multifaceted as the idea itself. Zen branched off from Buddhism, which originated in India. Buddhism soon traveled to China and “Chan” Buddhism was developed and it soon traveled to Japan, where it acquired the name “Zen.” Although Chan and Zen had a similar source, they went in very diverse directions (Stanley-Baker 148). The Japanese tea ceremony was heavily influenced by the Zen principles of harmony, purity, and respect. In contrast, the Chinese tea ceremony consisted of a jubilant atmosphere which celebrated special occasions. Unlike the Japanese ceremony, there were no strict rules that applied to the preparation and serving of tea (Teng Kok Tan). The décor, architecture, and utensils used in the Japanese tea ceremony were very bare and lacked a show of elegance. This illustrated the style Japan held in high esteem, known as wabi. “The aesthetic of wabi encourages restraint in expression and cherishes the unaffected beauty associated with loneliness, poverty, or rusticity” (Rousmaniere 205). The motivation of the tea ceremony is the creation of a peaceful occasion -- the convergence of the guest with the tea and the surroundings. One’s whole being merges with the ceremony as one’s whole attention is invested into each unfolding moment (Towler 66-68).

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Author and Zen Abbot John Daido Looi asks us to “imagine a universe in which all things have a mutual identity. They all have an interdependent origination: when one thing arises, all things rise simultaneously. Everything, also, has a mutual causality: what happens to one thing happens to the universe. Imagine a universe in which all the parts and totality are a single entity; all of the pieces and the whole thing are, at once, one thing” (Looi XI). In this passage, Looi invites us to speculate about the nature of Zen, thus continuing the perennial enquiry into its essential nature. Since no certain definition can be formulated, it is easier to describe what Zen is not. It is not simply a religion nor a philosophy; instead it goes beyond wisdom and language. Nor is it a set of principles regulating the universe. Most simply, Zen is meditation. It began as meditation and continues to be so (Cunningham 1-3). Despite the ambiguous nature of Zen, one can still experience this phenomena through a relatively simple ceremony, that of drinking tea. Zen is best embodied in the Japanese Tea Ceremony; the architecture of tea house, the tea ware, and the ritual itself.

The Japanese tea house was derived from Chinese models of the Song Dynasty. Initially the Chinese tea ceremony was simple yet sophisticated. The tea drinkers' enthusiasm reflected the intellectual and social life of the era. Offering tea to guests became a universally accepted practice. However over time, the tea ware became more extravagant and diverged sharply from its simpler origins. The Chinese tea ware and architecture became extravagant, using smooth porcelain bowls and décor with specially chosen paintings for the tea room, Chinese calligraphy scrolls, and flower arrangements (Stanley-Baker 148). The Chinese tea ceremony consisted of a jubilant atmosphere while celebrating special occasions, with no strict rules that applied to the preparation and serving of tea (chinesetimeschool).

When tea was exported to Japan the practice of making tea developed very differently. The tea plant made its way from China to Japan through a Zen priest named Eisai Myo-an. He brought the first tea seeds to Japan and planted them within the vicinity of his temple (Towler 57-59). Although the ceremony and the tea itself originally came from China, the Japanese tea ceremony followed a strict set of rules of specific conduct during preparation and service (Teng Kok Tan).

As the ceremony flourished in Japan there were influential tea masters who further developed the ceremony into what is known as the Way of Tea, always following what is termed the Way of Zen (Towler 57-59). The Japanese tea ceremony was heavily influenced by the Zen principles of harmony, purity, and respect (chinesetimeschool).

The 15th century tea-master, Shukō, established the process of drinking tea in quiet surroundings, creating an art form to be cherished in a secluded, spare room that has been specially designed for the consumption of tea (Stanley-Baker 148). After Shukō introduced the basic tea house structure for the ceremony, all other facets, including the architecture, became fully established by the most prominent tea master known as Sen no Rikyū. He began his study of tea and Zen from a young age. His first teacher conducted the ceremony in the old shoin style, which involved a large reception area. Another tea master introduced him to a different and simple space in a small thatched hut (Towler 64-65).

From this introduction, Rikyū created the definite style of the Japanese tea ceremony known as wabicha or the wabi style. Nicole C. Rousmaniere, author of *Tea Ceremony Utensils and Ceramics*, describes the “emphasis on intimacy, simplicity, and quiet elegance. The aesthetic of wabi encourages restraint in expression and cherishes the unaffected beauty associated with loneliness, poverty, or rusticity” (205). This philosophy of wabi is perfectly embodied in Rikyū's Tai-an tea room. The structure of this small room is based on rough, organic forms created from earthen materials, cedar-textured walls, the different shapes of windows made of paper, gnarled, wooden beams, and ceilings of roughhewn, wooden boards (Stanley-Baker 148). The use of the

natural elements in the structure illustrates the spirit of Zen: the inhabitants of this world are as one with each other and the earth surrounding them (Loori XII and 3).

The architecture is not the only component that exemplifies the wabi style. Rikyū also advocated the use of tea bowls and utensils that resembled ragged peasant ware and discouraged the use of extravagant, smooth porcelain from China (Stanley-Baker 148). He began using simple raku bowls, which were not fashioned by the wheel, but by hand, giving the raku bowls a weathered texture. Lavish glazes from China were no longer desired for tea bowls. Instead, they used black and deep red glazes and created rough textures which offered an agreeable contrast with the deep green of the tea. This change also applied to the utensils for tea. The lavish utensils made from Chinese porcelain were replaced with utensils made from natural elements, such as bamboo or wood. The use of natural materials play a significant role in the Way of Tea and the inseparable Way of Zen (Towler 65).

Rikyū also realized that many people who performed the ceremony lacked maturity and true knowledge of the Way of Tea. They did not understand Zen nor the meditation that accompanies it. Their only wish was to put their superficial knowledge on display for their guests to observe. They also took pride in the expensive tea ware, which is a complete contradiction of the ceremony. Consequently, these “tea masters” had not experienced the simple yet uplifting ritual (Towler 65).

Author and tea expert Solala Towler states:

It is a ceremony that takes the simple art of drinking tea to a sacred level, where the host and the guests share a moment of worship of the simple art of preparing and drinking of tea together, elevating them to a level of purity and refinement (66).

The Way of Tea is also known as chanoyu in Japanese, meaning “hot water for tea,” roughly translated as “tea ceremony” (Rousmaniere 203). The guest invited to chanoyu, is requested to leave the concerns of the outside world at the entrance of the tea room. From there, the guest crawls in on all hands and knees through the entrance called nigiri guchi, creating a sense of equality among all. Within these walls, the social hierarchy temporarily diminishes. After the guests arrive into the tea room, they are introduced to an atmosphere of intimacy and become one with all that are present (Stanley-Baker 148-149).

The tea ceremony begins when the tea master brings the tea ware into the room. After everything has been placed on the table (or floor), the elements must be purified by wiping them with a cloth and placing them in very specific locations. The purification of the tea whisk includes pouring hot water into the tea bowl and submerging the whisk in the hot water. Once the purification has ended, the tea master disposes of the waste water and wipes the bowl clean. The matcha powder is then scooped from its container and placed in the tea

bowl, and the tea master adds hot water to the matcha. The tea is whisked thoroughly and served to the first guest. Once the guest returns the bowl, the purification and serving process begins again. Once all of the guests have consumed their tea, the ceremony draws to a close. The tea master cleanses the utensils and places them all back together in their initial positions. The entire procedure is very precise and conducted in a slow, relaxed pace. The drinking of tea itself is not the only facet of the chanoyu. The purification and the making of the tea also plays into the overall experience (Yamamoto).

The Way of Tea is more than making and consuming tea. It is the creation of an art form that illustrates life. It is the creation of a peaceful occasion -- the convergence of the guest with the tea and the surroundings. One's whole being merges with the ceremony as one's whole attention is invested into each unfolding moment. This is why careful attention is paid to each movement and each placement. The Way of Tea and the Way of Zen are as one; they are inseparable. One thus transcends beyond the mundane world and attains a spiritual realm. The ideology of Zen is encompassed wholly and beautifully within the Way of Tea, thus earning the appropriate name, "Way of Zen" (Towler 66-68).

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