

# Why Tea, Why Ceremony?

My relationship with tea began in early childhood. I was born in Singapore, then a British colony and home to an extraordinary mix of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Singhalese, and Europeans. Most of them drank a great deal of tea. As a little girl, I was as familiar with tea as a child growing up in the United States might be with milk. But tea was only one of the thousand delights of my childhood, a commonplace among the tempting curries, noodles, spiced rice, mangos, and *chendol*—a shaved-ice ambrosia of coconut cream, palm sugar, and green pandanus jellies offered at the fabulous food stalls along the city's streets and alleys.

When I was seven, a Chinese opera set up a huge tent on a vacant lot in our neighborhood. Clanging cymbals lured me across the street, where I wandered among stalls and dressing nooks in which the actors were preparing for a performance. Dazzled by their sequins, I felt lost among the blue, red, gold, and yellow-painted faces until a kindly woman who tended costumes beckoned me. When I approached, she offered me a tiny handleless cup filled with tea, which she had carefully poured from a small ceramic teapot. It was not at all like our tame home-brewed tea, but fragrant and slightly bitter. It was from China, exotic, unknown, and it was my introduction to tea as something other than my customary childhood fare, something more alluring.

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In the late 1950s I would have tea at the old Raffles Hotel on Singapore's Beach Road. There, under the gentle whirl of the ceiling fans, afternoon tea was served in porcelain cups, accompanied by tiny sandwiches and an array of cakes and eclairs. Being grown-up by then, I would wear my best dress and enjoy conversations with friends and visitors. More than once my mind floated with the piano music out from the lounge and over the open-air Palm Court. I did not yet know that by taking tea and letting myself be transported beyond the sweeping staircases and the stuccoed columns, I was seeking a momentary removal from the problems and routine of everyday life.



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Figure 1

*Teacup and  
madeleine*

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Years later, I read in *Remembrance of Things Past* how a cup of tea and one of those squat, plump little cakes called “petites madeleines” had caused Proust to “shudder” as he recalled a “powerful joy.” I remembered those afternoons at the Raffles, but it was not until the 1980s that I was able to make the connection between tea and that joy. I was living in San Francisco

and had begun to practice *chanoyu*, the Japanese tea ceremony, and to appreciate the vision of Lu Yu, China's patron saint of tea, and the wisdom of Sen Rikyu, Japan's greatest tea master. Until then, I had been simply one of the many millions of people who had developed an enduring affection for this age-old beverage.

My experience of tea eventually merged with a profound interest in Zen Buddhism. Both enhanced my life, providing relief through the trials of marriage and divorce as well as insight into the confusion and hopes encountered in daily life. In 1992, early one morning in London (where I was traveling on business), I sat down on a bench in Holland Park to watch some ducks floating in a quiet pond. The harmony of movement and stillness produced a tranquility of mind and body both refreshing and lucid.

It occurred to me that the Japanese, who had interned my family and me in Singapore during the war, maintained a culture which in later life offered me so much freedom through the practice of Zen meditation and the Way of Tea. I came to see that tea and Zen complemented each other and were aspects of a single practice, one that has helped me understand how and why, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, meditation and ceremony are more important than ever. I have found that my Zen decision to be in the moment can be attained in the making of a bowl of tea.

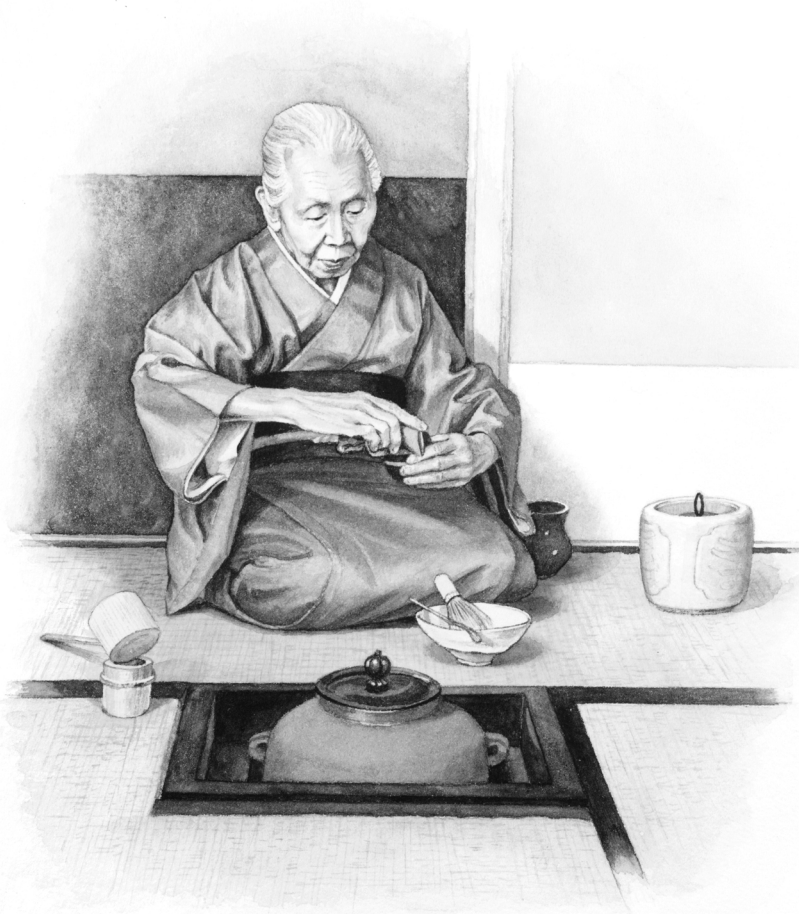
When patiently and attentively prepared, a bowl or cup of tea becomes a means to achieve calm, much like meditation. However, while meditation requires the body to be stilled and the mind emptied, the tea ceremony calls for an awareness of place and procedure. It clears the mind, opens the heart, and establishes an affinity between host and guest. It might be said that whereas meditation is passive and silent, the tea ceremony is active and sensitive to sound and sight and, above all, to the dignity of human exchange.

I first encountered traditional Japanese tea culture in 1986, when I was invited to a tea ceremony lesson at Green Gulch, the Zen center just north of San Francisco. The occasion was fortuitous, for I met Soshi Nakamura, who later became my teacher, or *sensei*. Even though I had read about the

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tea ceremony, I was quite unprepared for what I witnessed. As I sat in the tea room and observed the lesson, the commitment of students and teacher impressed me, and I began to see how and why the ancient ritual of tea was so exquisitely preserved. I will never forget the way both teacher and students fervently adhered to the tiniest detail of preparation and procedure. A spirited woman in her eighties, Nakamura Sensei repeatedly reminded her students that the practice of tea was akin to *zazen*, or seated meditation. Tea required the same focus, the same meticulous attention. The source of this focus was mindfulness with respect for the natural as well as manmade world. Students were taught to walk in the tea room as if their first step were their last.



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Figure 2

Nakamura Sensei

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After the lesson, Nakamura Sensei made me a bowl of the powdered green tea. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted. Its fragrance was fresh and grassy, and the slightly bitter flavor was balanced by the Japanese sweet she served me. I felt renewed, alert, and, after a second bowl, totally captivated, as much by the ceremony as by the beverage. The movements of host and guest seemed so naturally choreographed. The gentle yet precise motions of purifying the tea scoop, ladling the water, and whisking and serving the tea prompted me to ask Nakamura Sensei if I might come again and take lessons.

But how frustrated I was by those first lessons! It took months to assimilate etiquette and procedures, and even longer to master simple technique. With no cushion between my feet and the tatami mat, the hours I spent sitting on my heels seemed at times endlessly excruciating. I thought of quitting, but after years of Zen meditation I was familiar with the initial difficulties of mastering a discipline, so I stayed.

As I became more used to the posture and began to understand the poetic logic of the tea ceremony, I realized that the more aware I was of every movement, the more my actions seemed to flow, and the more I felt a sense of unity—as much with the utensils as with the guests and the soft mood of the room. It was as if I were meditating, though no meditation was involved. I learned then that tea could be a means of achieving a sense of keen satisfaction. With the mind in a clear and harmonious state, peace could enter the room and my heart. There were mistakes, of course, and occasional confusion, but these were usually minimized by the calming sound of the steaming kettle and the taste of an elegant bowl of tea. At such times, the stoic, encouraging figure of Nakamura Sensei allowed me to maintain my confidence in practice. Although she retired seven years later and went back to Japan, I still felt her presence whenever I returned to Green Gulch.

Like meditation, an appreciation of tea and the practice of ceremony restore a vital sense of awareness, grace, and beauty, qualities so often missing

in our age of technology. The art of ceremony offers a way to bring deliberate attention to our actions, allowing us to create a “removal” into rare tranquility. As D. T. Suzuki has said, it “wonderfully lifts the mind above the perplexities of life.”<sup>1</sup> Such a removal diminishes the everyday stresses of living that harass the body and mind and add to the difficulties that so often weave their way into our relationships with one another.

By ushering us into the present, the procedure of a tea ceremony offers an experience of the moment-to-moment flow of life and our relationship with all things. Cultivating the earth and harvesting what we plant helps us see that flowers and the hands that arrange them are one, and recognize that we are as responsible for our own well-being as for the world in which we live. Although we may often feel as helpless about personal anxiety as we do about the depleted ozone or the plight of the homeless, we can develop habits that encourage an inner quiet and a sense of wholeness. Thus “removal” is not an escape, but a way to gain greater perspective on our existence. Practice of the tea ceremony provides us with a better way to understand action and reaction. There are no errors in making tea if the attitude of mind is that of true hospitality. Host and guest will naturally know the harmonious thing to do. This kind of insight comes from commitment, from calm and focus. The ceremony brings about a certain mood, and, through the cooperation of host and guest, the deeper meaning is revealed. In a serene atmosphere, as we let go of the ceaseless weave of our thoughts by just sitting and allowing the breath to settle, we realize the connectedness of everything about us. Through a setting of quiet simplicity, tranquility becomes part of the ceremony itself.

I soon learned that to practice tea required not only a respect for its mystique but also a familiarity with its history. In tracing the development of the tea ritual and its significance from East to West, I discovered a rich and fascinating evolution.

<sup>1</sup> Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, page 366

Most historians agree that the cultivation of tea began in China at least four thousand years ago, and that it was first used both medicinally and as a condiment. However, shrouded in folklore and academic speculation as the subject is, no one knows when tea was first used as a beverage. Tea became a way of celebrating life through the vision of the eighth century Chinese practitioner Lu Yu. He improved the method of drinking tea by showing how it should be made, and how—through the careful selection and preparation of place, utensils, water, and tea—a simple ceremony could be created in which beauty and harmony were realized.

In China, Zen monks later made a ritual out of drinking tea in front of the image of their first patriarch, Bodhidharma. Japanese Buddhists, who had traveled to China throughout the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) in search of enlightenment and cultural exchange, brought tea to Japan, and by the end of the twelfth century tea was widely appreciated there.<sup>2</sup> In the sixteenth century, Sen Rikyu developed *Chado*, the Way of Tea, and brought to it the spirit of art, hospitality, morality, and philosophy.

First enjoyed by monks in monasteries and aristocrats at court, tea took on cultural significance with spiritual as well as political ramifications. In ancient China, Taoists believed tea to be an elixir; in Japan, it became an intrinsic part of the culture. In the days of Rikyu, whose patron was the powerful shogun, Hideyoshi, strict class distinctions were observed, but those who wished to enter a tea room had to divest themselves of all armaments and rank. To encourage humility among participants in the ceremony, the entrances to a Japanese tea house were reduced in height, so that host and guests had to lower their heads to enter. The entryway for guests was so small that they had to crawl in, which meant that the armed samurai were obliged to leave their swords outside.

The use of tea spread from East to West in the early sixteenth century. The desire for tea in the West soon gave rise to elaborate afternoon rituals, which reached their zenith in Victorian times and are still practiced today—

<sup>2</sup> Varley and Isao, *Tea in Japan*, page 234

albeit with less formality. The popularity of these rituals, however, often obscured the health benefits of the beverage itself.

In researching the various methods of processing tea and herbal beverages, as well as the numerous varieties and their availability, I looked into ancient and current claims about the health benefits of tea. Now that the connection between mind and body and between health and healing has been more widely recognized in the West, there is a much greater appreciation of the curative properties of tea and its herbal counterparts. Recently, Westerners have begun to profit from the Chinese art of healing with tea and herbs. From claims of medicinal value in ancient China to present-day research, tea has remained unsurpassed as a soothing, refreshing, and healing beverage.

Today, more tea is consumed worldwide than any other beverage except water. Since 1960 the sale of tea has doubled in the United States, a phenomenon that reflects as much fascination with the ritual and ceremony of tea as with its consumption.

Ritual is part of individual human life as well as that of society. In Francis Ross Carpenter's introduction to Lu Yu's *The Classic of Tea*, ritual was to the Chinese never an end in itself, but "the behavioral expression of an inward ethic" that intensified one's "belief in the ethic." Deference to ritual paved the way for genuine respect: "Ritualistic acts of graciousness or politeness showed the path to peace and harmony and love. In many ways, ritual served the same ultimate purposes as law in the West."<sup>3</sup>

Although some rituals have a religious purpose or context, others exist in our everyday actions, both conscious and unconscious. Rituals have been devised for the various passages in the life of the individual as well as the tribe, and even today we observe rituals in eating, mating, politics, and war. Yet modern life in the West has evolved in such a way that we frequently tend to disregard the serious exercise of ritual. Its importance has diminished. But we can reclaim ritual in our personal lives and recognize how, by providing a meditative experience, the ritual of a tea ceremony can help

<sup>3</sup> Lu Yu, page 6





organize our scattered thinking and draw us into the present. With this aspiration in mind, I describe practical ways to create tea rituals in Chapter V, “Ways to Tranquility.”

I was drawn to the Japanese ceremony because of its refinement, beauty, and the unique removal it provides from the concerns of a busy life. Throughout the world, people from all walks of life have studied the Japanese Way of Tea, or *Chado*, from qualified Eastern and Western teachers. For most Westerners, however, traditional Japanese tea practice may present two problems.

The first is the linguistic and cultural barrier. Japanese is a difficult language to master, and the culture is very different from Western ones. Nevertheless, it is not hard to learn the required phrases and understand the basic instructions. And as one walks along the stone path of a hand-constructed tea house on a quiet afternoon or observes a reflection on the lid of a red-lacquered tea container, one need not be part of the culture to be moved by these simple pleasures.

The second problem is physical: most people have difficulty kneeling and sitting on their heels for long periods while practicing the tea ceremony. Fortunately, a table-style tea has been initiated in Japan, so that now a Way of Tea can be faithfully realized by anyone regardless of physical limitations. Although sitting at a table would never replace the naturalness and intimacy of the tatami mat of a Japanese tea room, table-style tea offers older students and those who have difficulty kneeling a way to appreciate the traditional ceremony. This adaptation allows even those in wheelchairs the opportunity to study tea.

Today in Japan, Dr. Sen Genshitsu, the fifteenth descendant of Sen Rikyu and former Grand Master of the Urasenke tradition of *Chado*, tells us that “a world of peace can start with just two individuals.” His modern approach, which encourages innovation while preserving tradition, is also illustrated by the new spirit of *Sabie Zen*, a movement organized by the Sabie Cultural Institute in Kyoto (see the glossary). Its aim is to create a new

understanding of the beauty in *Chado*, and it includes the use of modern works of art from the West as well as the East.

In considering this approach, I came to see how a set of simple rituals could be derived from the traditional principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility, yet be more suited to Western lifestyle and habits. In Part Two, Practical Adaptations, I offer a version of a Japanese table-style tea, as well as adaptations of Chinese and English ceremonies that anyone may do on one's own.

Adaptations can lead to a genuine understanding of the practice of tea ceremony. A meaningful tea ceremony may be conducted not only through time-honored procedures within a traditional tea house, but in any number of settings and under a variety of circumstances. Whenever we can pause for a few minutes, alone or with like-minded others, it is possible to create a removal from everyday concerns. The key is to provide the time, develop patience, and remember that the magic of tea improves not only our lives but the world in which we live. As Lu Yu said centuries ago, ritualistic deference “paves the way for genuine respect” and helps us find the “path to peace and harmony and love.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lu Yu, page 6

