Encounters with Tea

Peter Cavacuiti

I teach the Way of Tea in a side room of an Anglican Church, and in the vestry I was fortunate to find a copy of Thomas Merton's autobiography, *Elected Silence*. It is an extremely frank account of his searching for a spiritual pathway and how difficult it was for him. But even at that early stage in his twenties he was finding his voice and gaining advice from non -Christian Asian Sources, and finding an element of communality.

Thomas Merton met D.T. Suzuki in New York in the 1960s with Miss Okamura, Suzuki's lifelong amanuensis. On that occasion Tea was prepared and Zen was discussed.[1] When Jack Kerouac and his two friends visited Suzuki in 1958, Kerouac said that Suzuki 'brought us the green tea in cracked old soupbowls of some sort – He told us not to forget about the tea – when we left.'[2] This encounter seems to have distant echoes with the Patriarch Chao-chou Ts'ung-shen (778-897) who often enquired of his disciples 'Have you had a bowl of Tea?', meaning 'Are you in the present moment?'

Both D. T. Suzuki and Merton encountered bereavement early in their lives. Each seeking and answer to the question of mortality. Finding different pathways, but essentially converging on mutual empathy and understanding. Suzuki said of Merton that he truly understood Zen. For fifty years, I have had a treasured signed copy of Thomas Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, and D.T. Suzuki's book *Zen and Japanese culture* was instrumental in putting me on the pathway of studying the Way of Tea.[3]

Suzuki always stressed Zen as Zen *Buddhism*. His early insistence on *kenshō* or enlightenment was softened by his approach to Shin or Pure Land Buddhism, which teaches reliance on other power, rather than self-power. This was a possible link to the understanding of Thomas Merton. In Chinese practice of Chan Buddhism there is sitting meditation and chanting. Zen came relatively late to Japan in the twelfth century and early monastics found shelter in older traditions such as the Tendai or esoteric sect of Buddhism. It is difficult to understand Zen without a knowledge of Buddhist sutras. The teachings of the Kegon, or Huayan

(Flower Garland), sect are based on the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* and its main tenet of the concept of *ālaya* consciousness – that each individual is linked to everyone else, being a reflection of each one in the wonderful symbolism of Indra's Net. We are as pearls in Indra's net, independent yet each reflecting the other.

This interconnectedness is equally relevant in the Way of Tea as it is in Zen Buddhism. Zen uses the sutras as a powerful tool for its meditative practice. It also forms part of the training of most Tea Masters, studying for the most part with the Abbots from the Daitoku-ji Monastery in Kyoto. Meditation, *Tso Ch'an* in Chinese or *Zazen* (sitting Zen) in Japanese, is a tool for *kenshō* or illumination. The underlying reason for meditation is a means of 'perfuming karma', as one of my teachers used to say. Meditation is hard work and this direct means is not so easy for everyone. That is why the indirect means of *upaya* or skillful means, such as learning an art form, helps to lead one in the right direction. With any of the other pathways, literally dō or *michi*, we learn to develop various qualities. Foremost among them is learning obedience, losing one's ego, being compassionate and attentive. We learn skills, knowledge and the ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally.

The training in Tea is complex, there is a whole, entirely different world, with symbolism and etiquette to explore. We learn predominantly with our bodies, movements are corrected over and over again. We must master how to learn, not to look to the Master for correction, but to go ahead bravely making mistakes. We learn not just from the Master but also from fellow students. It is their responsibility to support new students and to prepare them for their *otemae* or their practice. If a newcomer makes mistakes, it is often their fellow students who are reprimanded. Through all the intricacies and the acquisition of ability, it is a wonderful experience to actually make a bowl of Tea where all extraneous thought is eliminated and one's being is wholly in the action of serving Tea. These glimmers of progress help to propel the student forward to increasing mastery. The final aim is to make Tea so comfortably that it seems the most natural thing in the world. Everything comes together, the layout, the choice of utensils, the Tea, the atmosphere and the conversation of the guests. There is Japanese saying '*Zen cha ichimi*' which can be translated as 'Zen and Tea have the same flavour.' A lifetime's energies and studies are transcended in this moment, just having a bowl of Tea and being in the present moment.

Apart from the obvious differences in their respective religious backgrounds both Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki found a common

ground of understanding in the appreciation of each other's spiritual and cultural backgrounds, which comes across in their writings. Thomas Merton from an early stage in his spiritual quest was guided by several non-Christian friends, including the Hindu monk Bramachari who suggested he read St Augustine. Moreover, D. T. Suzuki often acknowledged the thought of Meister Eckhart, with his use of the term Godhead. The Japanese Tea Master Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591) had twelve principal disciples who were all Christian and there is some evidence to suspect that he was too. His main innovation was the sharing of a bowl of tea, which hadn't happened before. He stressed importance of equality, which was a revolutionary approach in the feudal, stratified society he lived in. In the Tea room, aristocrats and commoners were of equal status. This approach still prevails; the only difference might be between someone who is trained in Tea procedure and someone who is not.

A Tea meeting is a ritualized performance, where each person is assigned a particular role. This is made clear in the invitation to attend. The whole event usually revolves around the first, or principal, guest. The meeting might be to celebrate a birthday, or the acquisition of a new object or simply to enjoy the first days of spring. The position of the other guests will also be mentioned in the invitation. The last guest is usually someone who is experienced in Tea and is close to the host. If something goes wrong, for example the spilling of the tea or some other mishap, then the last guest can be relied on to step in to support the host. The choice of guests is part of *toriawase*, a term which is also used for the selection of the utensils for the Tea gathering. The importance is to create a sympathetic and interesting environment, where each person contributes to the event.

There is a misconception that the making of Tea is conducted in silence. There are passages of quiet and this is heightened by the making of the Tea itself when cold water is added to a boiling kettle, so that even the murmuring of the water is silenced. In Buddhism there is the tenet of Right Speech, Right Action, etc., and so in Tea we have to attend to what we say. There is no discussion of politics, money or medical procedures. We take this rare opportunity to refresh ourselves, in simple discussion of what matters in this brief life.

The host is thanked for their *otemae*, this is not just for the making if the Tea but for the creation of the event. Tea Masters, in a way, are like conceptual artists – they are creative, inventive and original – constantly improvising in accord with the occasion. This is difficult and requires years of training to appear effortless. The mechanics of a Tea event are

comparable to a musical recital, the *teishu* or host, organizes everything like a conductor. The venue, the guests, time, season, objects, flowers and scroll all play a significant role. The making of the Tea is also calibrated with a change of pace and pauses – a true Master alters the sound of the kettle by pouring cold water in at crucial points of the ceremony for emphasis. The choice of utensils with a *mei* or name, should harmonise with the meaning of the scroll. Some Masters have suggested that the *mei* is more important than what the object looks like, showing the connection to philosophy and poetry. The last conversation between the principal guest and the host is the *mei* of the Tea scoop or *chashaku*. This should be a lingering feeling of enrichment.

The basis of Tea is found in various art forms from the Nō drama to aristocratic, artistic pursuits from the twelfth century, such as poetry, literature and incense appreciation. Over time, these have been blended into a cohesive form that we term the Tea Ceremony.

Tea emphasizes the feeling of *kimochi*, non-verbal understanding of others and a feeling of interconnectedness. In Tea the most prominent Buddhist figure is Vimalakīrti, or Yuima in Japanese, the wise layman who bested all of the Buddha's disciples except for the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, who was sent to visit him and asked about ultimate reality. Vimalakīrti's reply was a lion's roar of silence. His house, which became a model for the Tea room or *chashitsu*, contracted and expanded in space and time. In the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* we have such philosophical ideas as the equality between the sexes and of the realization of enlightenment not for oneself, but as an act of compassion for others. Being a wise layman was an ideal for Tea people, who strove to have the heart of a recluse in the world, a sense of inner detachment, but still playing their part in worldly affairs.

Notes

1. Merton's describes his meeting with Suzuki in June 1964 in his journal *Dancing in the Water of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 113-117.
2. Jack Kerouac, quoted from Rick Fields, *When the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2022), p. 260.
3. Suzuki, Daisetz T, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

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