

Chanoyu

The Way of Tea

*“One may memorize all the movements perfectly,
but if they are not carried out with the proper spirit,
the tranquility of the gathering will be lost.”*

*—Soshitsu Sen, Grand Master XV
Urasenke School of Tea*

There is a famous parable from the ancient literature of India named, “The Marriage Feast at Jambunada.” The story begins with a man preparing for his wedding that was to happen the next day. He and his family were very poor, and the hall in his house where the wedding feast was to take place was very small: by some telling, less than a hundred square feet. It was going to be a challenge to accommodate even a few family members, let alone feed them. While mulling over this challenge he had a brief fantasy of how great it would be if the Buddha himself could attend. Unknown to the soon-to-be bridegroom, the Buddha happened to be walking by at that very moment and was able to read the wish that was in the heart of the bridegroom. On the day of the wedding, the Buddha surprised everyone by attending along with a retinue of 80,000 followers. If that was not enough, soon, huge numbers of family members arrived. The story concludes with a miracle: everyone had plenty of space and abundant food and drink. This folktale wended its way down through many cultures over several millennia.

Later, in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Japan, some designers of teahouses were inspired by the idea that space and sustenance need not be limiting. Many Japanese teahouses were designed to be only nine feet square, reflecting the small space available in the bridegroom’s hall at the Marriage Feast of Jambunada. The designers knew that, even within a tiny teahouse, when the spirit of the Buddha was present, host and guest could experience the cosmos.

The practitioners of the *Chanoyu*¹ tea ritual were sometimes referred to as “teaists,” and the practice was known as “teaism.” Teahouses, specially designed for the serving of tea, define many of the basic architectural elements that we identify as Japanese style. Impressive roofs are dominant, while other structural elements are understated and meant to connect with the natural environment. Most of these small teahouses were intentionally unfurnished.

As time passed, teahouses developed in many styles and various sizes, while sharing in many other aspects. Typically, in one wall a recess, called the *tokonoma*,² was used to display a picture, or flower arrangement, or calligraphy, to be changed as the seasons changed.

Gardens were created to surround the teahouses. These gardens have come to define many of the elements of “Japanese” landscape design. In the garden, one could often find a hewn stone water basin for ritual cleansing before entering the teahouse. Near the water basin, a small hole in the ground was also available for the guests to dispose of negative thoughts and troubles. The teahouse and its landscape provided the matrix from which emerged many of the cultural arts that have long been considered as representative of Japanese culture: tea ceremony, calligraphy, architecture, flower arranging, and landscape gardening.

To begin to understand how such a simple act as serving a cup of tea assumed such prominence, we may compare the ceremony to theater. The garden is the setting; the teahouse, the stage. Host and one or more guests are the actors in a drama that unfolds as the host carefully arranges all of the tea utensils in preparation for the making and serving of tea. Before the actual making of the tea, the utensils each have to be carefully cleaned in front of the guests so that they will be comfortable in the knowledge that the preparation was properly done. Usually, the empty tea bowl is passed to the guest(s) for their examination. After looking carefully at this treasure, a short comment of appreciation from the guest is welcome before returning the bowl to the host. The utensils are infused with nature’s archetypal elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Ceramic bowls and containers are used representing earth, incense is burning, representing air, charcoal is alive with fire, and water is immediately available. The host mixes finely powdered tea with hot water and passes it to the guest. This drama acted out on the small stage, became an expression of four major principles: harmony, respect, purity, and inner peace.

(1) Harmony finds its expression through the practice of absolute sincerity in the relationships of host and guest in the context of the natural world. **(2) Respect** is found in the practice of humility. In this practice, we learn to see the world as it is. By allowing others to tell their story, without first imposing our own, respect for becoming-itself grows. **(3) Purity** can perhaps be best realized in the interplay between consciousness and the environment. The teaists believed that the environment was a projection of our state of consciousness and that, conversely, the environment had a profound effect on us. Hence, to purify the environment was to purify the character of the individual and vice versa. **(4) Inner peace** is derived from the practice of the first three principles. This peace is an absence of conflictive thoughts and actions. Indeed, it is a very efficient way of dancing on earth.

Most Important: Make the Guest Comfortable



Tea Whisk Chasen

In the early 1960s, I began to read books on Buddhism. At that time, Zen was becoming very prominent in American culture and, consequently, I was drawn to the study of that school of Buddhism. In 1966, I accepted a faculty position in philosophy at Pittsburg State University. While teaching there, I lived nearby, in Amitabha Ashrama—a Buddhist meditation community.

I found many aspects of Zen culture to be very attractive. I was especially drawn to the simplicity in design and love for the imperfect and impermanent. In 1974, while on a six-month university sabbatical, I took advantage of the opportunity to study *Chanoyu* at the Japanese Cultural Center in San Francisco.

At one end of the tea classroom in the Center, was a door leading to a kitchen where all of the tea utensils were washed, dried, and otherwise prepared. When they were ready, the utensils were taken to a nine-*tatami*³ mat tea area. Each mat was six by nine feet, two inches thick, and made of woven rice straw with a black brocade cloth edging.

Our class consisted of nine students. One by one, we received instruction while the remaining eight observed the lesson. Each student, in turn, began the lesson by carrying, from the kitchen, the utensils required for *Chanoyu*. In this fashion, every student had the opportunity to both observe the process and to practice it in front of others. To enter our training area, we walked the length of two mats, approaching a third mat where tea was to be prepared. We received instruction in maintaining the proper demeanor, including how to walk. The actual preparation of tea was done on the third mat, in a small area within the much larger classroom. On a basic level, *Chanoyu* is simply heating water, mixing it with powdered tea, and serving it to guests. The tea ceremony consists of a much more complex and stylized series of activities.

In the first phase of *Chanoyu*, the class learned to assemble the utensils on the mat. Accomplishing this task required several trips to the kitchen and back, to carry the necessary utensils to the mat. The cast iron *furokama*⁴ was heavy, and could not be carried without using both hands. The smaller objects—tea-bowl, powdered tea container, waste water bowl, water ladle, napkin and tea whisk—were carried separately, each hand often holding a collection of objects. Measured by the number of half-inch weaves of the mat, the utensils were arranged in a very specific pattern. The host measured powdered tea into the tea-bowl and then added hot water from the *furokama*. Next, mixing water and tea with the whisk, the host served the tea to the guest.

After drinking, the guest returned the empty bowl to the host. Then, the host wiped each utensil with a napkin before returning it to the kitchen.

Once, the teacher was asked, “Why do we go through the process of cleaning the utensils in front of the guests when everyone knows that utensils are nearly sterilized in the kitchen just before they are brought out to the mat?” The teacher answered, “It reassures the guests and makes them feel most comfortable.” The napkin involved in cleaning the utensils was folded differently, depending on the gender of the host. Even such a small detail as the position of the host’s thumb in holding the handle of the water ladle was gender-specific, as were a few other moves in *Chanoyu*.

Our teacher exhibited great interest in how we walked, how we sat, how we stood and how we turned. Wearing sock-like *tabi*, we took short, mincing steps, intentionally making a slight brushing sound with each foot, as we delivered the utensils to the mat. The teacher had turned away so she could not see us, the better to focus on the sound of our steps. She emphasized that each step must make just the right sound. Once, while bringing some items into the tea room, as I stepped across the first mat, onto the second, the teacher, hearing my steps, stopped me and exclaimed, “No! No! You must take three steps, not two. The other school takes two.” Perhaps it was the other way around; nearly fifty years has fogged my memory a bit. I was astonished to realize that she perceived my moves by hearing alone.

The teacher emphatically warned us that we must “Never, never, step on, or sit on, the brocade borders between mats.” When we asked why, she demurred, saying, “We can talk about that next time.” I think she hoped that we might forget to bring it up again. Of course, that didn’t work. At the very next class, the question came up again. The teacher reluctantly explained that, during one of the Samurai periods, some teahouses were built high enough off the ground that a person could, by crouching low, have access beneath the teahouse. She told us an old story of a warrior being able to thrust a sword up through the crack between loosely-constructed floorboards. Above the floorboards the thick tatami mats were impenetrable. However, the joints between the tatami mats offered no such protection. By taking advantage of this, a warrior might assure that a cup of tea would be the last for the hapless person careless enough to be sitting or stepping on a brocade border.

In all, I counted 415 steps, memorized in proper sequence, in this thirteen-minute drama. Consideration for the well-being of the guest and exploration of the meaning of the relationship of “host and guest” is a fundamental theme that permeates *Chanoyu*. Imbued with a smooth, consistent pace and efficiency; the tea ceremony, with no wasted motion, creates a general feeling of peace and ease. In *Chanoyu*, the utensils are moved around on the mat, much like pieces on a chess-board. The effect can be mesmerizing, with time itself standing still. So, I suppose, it’s not surprising that having found *Chanoyu*

so captivating, that in 1976, within a year of returning from San Francisco to Tucson, I designed and built a teahouse next to my home.

Almond Blossom Teahouse

Teahouses are given names. When building this four-and-a-half mat teahouse, in Tucson, Arizona, I named it “Almond Blossom,” to honor the almond tree that annually produced beautiful flowers in the tea-garden.



Almond Blossom Teahouse

In 1987, I entered a four-week intensive meditation retreat in the Almond Blossom teahouse. In the final week, seven friends, representing seven different spiritual traditions, came; each on a different evening, for tea and a simple *Cha Kaiseki*⁵ meal in the style of *Chanoyu*. After tea, each friend, at my request, shared a teaching from their spiritual traditions.

On the first night, Angela Zerdavis shared the teaching of the Uncreated Tabor Light of Greek Orthodox Christianity. On the second night, Nancy Wall told of the Love of Avatar Meher Baba. On the third night, Joe (Gyoka) Swaffar told that the measure of the authenticity of a Buddhist is that of being a true friend. On the fourth night, Methodist minister Lee Scott shared the teaching of the Love of God. On the fifth night, Yogini June Davidson chanted Yoga Mantras throughout the night in the teahouse. On the sixth night, Sharif Graham shared the Sufi teaching of the Torch of Truth that shines in every being and everything in the universe. Finally, on the seventh night, Zenjin Otis Bronson arrived and immediately began laughing. I joined him, and we didn't stop laughing for the rest of the evening. When it came to Zen, Otis always got directly to the point. Seven friends, seven guests for tea, and seven teachings, all wrapped in a teahouse named Almond Blossom: never to be forgotten.

Teahouse on the Rocks “shaken, not stirred”



Teahouse on the Rocks

In 1582, the most significant figure in the history of *Chanoyu*, Sen no Rikyu, built an extremely small teahouse named, *Tai-an*—now designated a National Treasure of Japan.⁶ This teahouse had only two mats—one for the guest and one for the host (a total of only 36 square feet). This was consistent with Rikyu’s pursuit of *Wabi-Sabi*—a minimalist esthetic of simplicity, intimacy, and austerity.⁷ For example, this esthetic typically values a somewhat asymmetrical tea bowl that is old and worn, with imperfections, over a bowl that’s new and perfect. There is wisdom to be found in the appreciation of simplicity and flawed beauty in objects long treasured.

In the fall of 2014, in honor of Rikyu, my brother-in-law Phil Van West and I built the two-mat teahouse we named “Teahouse on the Rocks” at my home in New Mexico. When the teahouse was finished, my first guest was, Carla Van West, to celebrate our thirty-fourth wedding anniversary with a *Cha-Kaiseki* dinner, followed by tea. Since then, formal *Chanoyu* has not been practiced very often, although many visitors have often got a “tour” of the tiny retreat and a chance to sit for a while learning about *Chanoyu*. “Teahouse on the Rocks,” with or without tea, with or without conversation, continues to be an excellent respite from a busy world and a retreat for quiet meditation.

Where is Laughing Dawn?

In the early 1980s, Zen Master Otis Bronson and I designed a one-room tea hut to be constructed near his home in the desert. We drew up plans, made an *Okoshi-ezu*⁸ model and named the teahouse "Laughing Dawn." At Otis's suggestion, we followed closely with what the desert had already created as a landscape for the tea garden. Our rock-lined path, winding through the desert, led through mesquite trees, cholla, saguaro, and many beautiful plants. At the final turn in the pathway, the tea hut suddenly would appear. However, Laughing Dawn consisted only of four small stakes: one at each corner of a nine-foot square. This invisible teahouse might better have been named The Tea Hut of the Emperor's Clothes or, maybe, Brigadoon.



Laughing Dawn Teahouse

After completing the landscaping, Otis and I sat on the desert floor within the nine-foot square envisioning the tea-house-to-be in all its imagined beauty. Because of other demands on our lives, it eventually became clear that we were never to complete construction of this teahouse. However, in later years, we continued to walk the path together, turn the corner, sit on the desert floor, and share an empty cup of no-tea in the teahouse-that-never-was and was never-to-be. Even the desert approved of Otis's teahouse; this is the best teahouse I ever visited, named Laughing Dawn.⁹

In *Chanoyu*, the relationship of host and guest, the handling of objects of great beauty, the experience of connecting with earth, air, fire, and water, all contribute to well-being. Beauty is appreciated, and the mind is gathered. The chatter of the world retreats in the face of "just a cup of tea." For me, and for many others, the "Way of Tea" is an experience of ultimate mindfulness. *Chanoyu*, in the final analysis, is more than symbolic—it is deeper than that. It touches and resonates with the center of becoming-itself when participants: guest, host, and nature, pause and connect with the heart of Buddhism for a cup of tea.

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¹ For more information about Chanoyu see: <http://japanese-tea-ceremony.net/>

² <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/japanese-tearoom-tokonoma>

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatami>

⁴ A charcoal brazier or Furo, with a water pot or Kama on top

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaiseki#Cha-kaiseki>

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tai-an>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi>

⁸ A small fold-up 3-D architectural paper model that can be folded flat and easily stored when not in use

⁹ Photo by Kali Bronson