

Quick Dharma Series
Chanoyu: the Tea Ceremony
by Gyoshin

From its inception in the late 12th Cent. to the present, *Chanoyu* has been intimately tied to Zen Buddhism. Those who developed *Chanoyu*, or tea ritual, were sometimes referred to as “teaists” and the practice as “teaism.” Special structures designed for the purpose of serving tea defined the basic architectural elements which we in the West have come to identify as Japanese: dominant roofs with understatement in other structural elements and clean natural lines fitting in with the natural environment. Most of these tea houses were single small rooms with no furniture. In one wall would be a recess for a picture or a flower arrangement, or a scroll with calligraphy.

Small gardens were constructed next to the tea houses. These gardens came to define most of the elements of landscape design which we usually identify as “Japanese.” Within these landscapes many interesting features developed. Usually these were related to the purification of the self. Next to the tea house was a small water basin of rock for the ritual rinsing of hands and mouth. One of the most interesting features was a small hole in the ground. Before entering the tea house one could ritually dispose of one’s negative thoughts and troubles into this hole.

The tea house and its landscape provided the matrix from which emerged the dominant cultural arts of Japan – tea ceremony, calligraphy, architecture, flower arranging, and landscape gardening. All of these arts are intimately linked to the history of tea. To begin to understand how such a simple act as serving a cup of tea came to assume such significance we must look to both the tea utensils and the mini-drama that unfolds between the host and guest. The utensils are infused with the archetypal elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The drama acted out on this small stage is one of seeking absolute sincerity and a deep identification with nature. Through centuries of practice four major principles came to be identified with *Chanoyu* – harmony, respect, purity, and inner peace.

- Harmony finds its expression through the practice of absolute sincerity in the relationships of host and guest in the context of the natural world.
- Respect is found in the practice of humility. In this practice we learn to see the world as it really is. By allowing others to tell their story, without first imposing our own, respect for being-itself grows.
- Purity, the third principle, 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.
- Inner peace, derived from the practice of the first three principles, is a harmony with nature, an absence of conflictive thoughts and actions. Indeed, a very efficient way of dancing on the earth.

Chanoyu, in the final analysis, is not really symbolic. It is deeper than that. It touches the center of being-itself as the participants – guest, host, and nature pause for a cup of tea. This is the heart of Buddhism.