

Tea Here Now

April 2007

The Eyelids of Bodhidharma

In Buddhist legend a devoted monk vows to sit in meditation for nine years. As much as his heart would have it though, his eyes will not stay open. A cry of anguish breaks the quiet of the sanctuary as he reaches up. Tearing his eyelids from his eyes, he flings them to the ground, vowing that he will never fall asleep again. From the flesh on the ground grows a densely covered bush whose dark, almond-shaped foliage is a testament to its origins. Since that time, tea made from those leaves has been known to promote mental alertness and physical relaxation, and appreciated as an ally to meditation.

Bodhidharma's approach to Zen was unique as his method for staying awake. Rather than seeing Zen as an approach to Buddhahood, he equated Zen with Buddhahood as well as the everyday mind. In sutras attributed to Bodhidharma he said, "The mind's capacity is limitless, and its manifestations are inexhaustible. Seeing forms with your eyes, hearing sounds with your ears, smelling odors with your nose, tasting flavors with your tongue, every movement or state, is all your mind." Meditation is one way to come to our senses. The tea ceremony is another. In the tearoom all the senses are engaged: the fragrance of the incense, the sight of the calligraphy scroll in the altar, the feel of the tea bowl in our hands, the sound of the water in the kettle softly sighing, and the sharp, green taste of the foamy tea. Coming to our senses, whether through meditation or tea, we come back to ourselves.

We can develop our own way of tea where "just" making a cup of tea and sitting down to sip it slowly is meditation. A complete *chanoyu* ceremony takes about four hours. It's a beautiful, moving experience, but not a daily practice. In truth it doesn't matter whether we kneel on a tatami mat or sit on the couch to drink our tea. "Just" taking the time to stop, to feel the warmth of the cup in our hands and the steam against our face, to breathe deeply and notice the fragrance of the tea, to sip the tea slowly and taste it fully is our practice and tea becomes our teacher. Sitting alone, tea is the taste of contemplation. Taking a break, tea is the breath of renewal. Sharing tea with another, tea is the warmth of friendship. Appreciating the environment around us, tea is the fragrance of nature.

Centuries of ceremony, countless hours in the meditation halls and genetic links to a Buddhist patriarch along with a history tied to humanity for over 5,000 years have imbued tea with a spirit that makes it so much more than a beverage. "Just" make a cup of tea and discover tea's mystique for yourself.