

Wu De: Tea as the Great Connector by Bela Shah

Before experiencing the beautiful gift of an Awakin Call with Zen monk and Tea Master, Wu De, I never would have understood the magic of tea. Other than being vaguely aware of its medicinal powers and high end varieties, there was little more that I knew and I certainly wouldn't have equated tea with being "the great human connector". But the wisdom with which Wu De shared with us how tea connects us back to nature, to each other, and to ourselves opened my heart to more than a different way of starting my day.

Journeying from a Rural Ohio to Taiwan

Suzanne: How did you find tea, being that you were born in North America? How did you listen to the self and find your way home?

Wu De: The Buddha said that we find a path, we must cultivate it to the extent that we would find that path again...make the roots deep enough so when the storm of death comes, they still hold. I was born with my eyes to the east, even though I wasn't born around any Chinese people and I grew up in a rural town in Ohio. My name "Wu De" actually means "of nothing" so it's only fitting that I come from nowhere.

When I was 2 years old, one of the first acts I did was write a letter to Santa Clause that I wanted a Chinese sister. Then again when I was 3 years and 4 years old I asked for the same thing. They finally gave me a doll. Later, a study of martial arts led to tea and meditation. At the end of next year, I will have spent half my life in Asia.

Suzanne: Being that you laid deep roots and made it home, can you share with everyone what you feel in this moment that you were asked to do in this lifetime and what that vision is from here forward and even into the next?

Wu De: I want to convey a frequency of presence and loving kindness based in non-sectarianism and freedom from conceptualization or belief or agreement or disagreement. I believe that tea is a powerful carrier of that message.

"If you put a Buddhist, a Christian, a Hindu, and a Muslim in a room and they talk about religion and politics they will argue but if they only talk about tea and drink tea, they will come out brothers. I've seen it happen."

And I've seen as I've traveled the world, people translate the wisdom of tea into whatever tradition they come from...because the sharing and drinking of tea is a nonverbal transmission.

Tea sutras were written by nature in the veins of the leaf and they're timeless and nonverbal. When I offer you this bowl of tea, you can't say that you don't believe in it or disagree with it because there is nothing to disagree with. It's just an act of loving

kindness and an act of presence.

Suzanne: What is the purpose of your tea and meditation centers, Tea Sage Hutand Light Meets Life?

Wu De: The centers try to cultivate three things: sustainability, meditation, and tea. Everyone that comes here is offered tea, fed, and housed, and it's all free, including the teachings.

But it's not just free financially. The donation box that is downstairs states in Chinese characters that the price of this tea is "anything from 1 cent to 10,000 in gold, otherwise it's free. I only wish I could give it to you for less." This center is also free in the sense that we aren't promoting any philosophy or world view. We aren't even promoting a meditation technique.

Tea is the Great Connector

Suzanne: How does tea create connections?

Wu De: In China, tea is known as the great connector. When it is grown and produced and shared properly, tea connects us in three essential ways.

First of all, tea connects us to nature. We haven't lost our connection to nature, we've lost the feeling of our connection to nature. Our ancestors grew their own food, their clothes and homes were made of plants, and there weren't any hospitals so the medicine was either plants or magic. Nowadays, we live in concrete houses and wear synthetic clothes and eat chemical medicine and processed food. So that feeling and connection to nature is gone but the connection itself is still there.

Every breath you take is created by trees and tea helps us to realize that and connect with it. It's a very magical plant; each leaf holds herbs and minerals, sunshine and moonshine. There is an old saying in China that goes, "Tea brings nature to society."

Second, tea connects us to ourselves. Nowadays we're so distracted, we're constantly barraged with information and it's so obvious that a bowl of tea leads inward, it's moving inward, your attention is going into your mouth and into the flavors and aromas and then into the sensations as it goes into your stomach and body.

Finally, tea also connects us to each other. Tea allows for a space of equality. In Japan, a tearoom was the only place where you can find a fisherman and a woman and a samurai in the same place.

One of the oldest Chinese texts on tea says that, "In the morning when I take my tea, it's the only time of day that I can be rest assured that at that time of the day what I'm doing is the exact same thing that the Emperor himself is doing."

So there's this sense that when you get in a tea space and you share some tea, people become present and they set down their masks and their roles and their egos and their gender and connect and that's something that even the Indians and the British have always understood. Tea isn't just a medicine or a plant, but it's also a time. It's a time for setting down the world and the day and connecting to people on a meaningful level. If you have any experience drinking tea with people, you can quickly realize that conversations automatically turn to what's meaningful. It just facilitates that, that's one of its healing powers.

When we're connected, living in harmony with all life on this planet, then all of the problems discombobulate, they don't have any relevance anymore. This is the definition of sickness. People are so sick that they don't connect the pollution they put into the air with the pollution they breathe.

This planet doesn't have environmental problems, it doesn't have climate problems, it doesn't have ecological problems, this planet has only one kind of problem and that's people problem. If you look at people, we only have one kind of problem and it's not political or economic, it's a heart problem. Our hearts are out of harmony with the spirit and with each other and when we're healed and find our harmony, then the people problem will vanish.

Suzanne: What is living tea?

Wu De: Living tea is grown in the traditional way, it's seed propagated, and it has room to grow upward and outward. Those that are using tea as part of their spiritual cultivation will seek out living tea and the living tea will seek them out too.

As the man seeks the leaf, the leaf will seek the man; she is a spirit and she has her own destiny. That shift in perspective is part of the medicine of tea; when you begin to relate to this plant as medicine, you begin to see that it's energy and that it has its own destiny and then it starts making sense that it finds who it wants to.

Recognizing Life Energy in a Stone

Suzanne: How can we bring mindfulness to all things as we move through our day to help assist us in coming into harmony with self and others?

Wu De: If you go back to your childhood, you will remember that you lived in a world that was very much alive and they conditioned that out of you.

If you go and ask and a three-year old child, "Go speak to that stone over there," that child will go and say, "Hello Mr. Stone." That distinction between organic and inorganic, between intelligent and unintelligent is not real. The world is made of energy; see what happens when you shift your perspective.

I know from personal experience. I don't see the world as stuff anymore, I'm not complicated by that. I see spirit, I see energy, I see movement, and I see change. I don't see objects, stuff, and nouns.

In a Sufi story, this man was on his way to see this faquir, which is a Muslim holy man. Along the way he was robbed. By the time he reached the faquir he was completely aggravated and he slammed the door and sat down with a sigh. And the faquir said, "I will teach you, but first I want you to go apologize to that door." The man said, "That's stupid, who would apologize to a door?" The faquir said, "If the door is alive enough to receive your anger, it's alive enough to receive your apology."

The absurdity is if the world is just stupid matter, then any communication with it at all would be insane but it's obviously not and if you look in the west, it's socially acceptable to put all the negative emotions into so-called objects and it's socially unacceptable to put all the positive emotions into these same objects.

If you saw a guy shouting at his cell phone because it wasn't working, you wouldn't think

twice but if you saw the same guy hugging his cell phone and telling it that he loved it, you would think he's insane.

So why is it that objects are alive enough to receive all of our negativity but they're not alive enough to receive all of our positivity?

You can go back to when you were a child and remember how everything was alive, whether it was the trees or your stuffed animals. Everything was magic and everything had life in it and it's definitely possible to live that way again. It's something that tea and decades of meditation have reopened for myself and if I can experience that, you definitely can experience that.

Serving Tea in a Gift Economy

Suzanne: Can you share how you serve with tea, not just serve it to others, but also serve it in community and out in public, and what the result is when you're in that space outside of the center?

Wu De: We set up what we call roadside tea and we go to events and markets and place a mat on the ground and just serve tea. There's not any philosophy or teaching or anything said. We just try to hold a space of presence and we make contracts with our hearts that no matter what happens, we're going to maintain both presence and loving kindness. People can use the space for whatever they want, they can ask questions, they can chat, or they can sit in silence. We don't have any agenda. We're not even there to promote tea or the ideas we've been discussing in this conversation.

Here in Taiwan there are hustling, bustling people always on their way to something and then they stop and see us just sharing tea and wonder what we're doing. Then they sit down with us and some of them end up staying all day even though they didn't intend to while others get up after one or two bowls. But their day has been changed because they were just with five or six people who were incredibly present and sharing loving kindness.

The symptoms of our disconnection with each other and ourselves and with nature are so apparent and when we create an invitation to connection by saying, "Here I am to anybody that walks by. I will look at you and see you and connect with you and greet you and it doesn't matter where you come from. I'm here and I see you and my heart is open and we can be brothers and sisters if you want and we can connect right now."

Suzanne: Can you share about the Global Tea Hut, how it has grown, and the layers of connectivity that have occurred during the growth of that community?

Wu De: Through Global Tea Hut people around the world donate energy in the form of \$20 a month and other people donate tea, living teas or organic plantation tea. Each member receives a tea of the month, a small gift, and a magazine that describes the tea, where it comes from and if possible, the farmer. The whole thing is this huge gift process because almost all of the teas are donated so we're not running a business. It's just a big gift exchange and through it we fund our center where people connect with each other.

The magic of it is that we've found 70 or 80 independent sources and we have members from around the world that are drinking the same tea every month. We also try to use the magazine to introduce a new member every month and so you get to see that someone in Russia or Spain is drinking the exact same tea that you're drinking this month. Some of these people are even connecting to each other through social media. I think we would like to see annual gatherings happen where people meet each other over tea.

The Art of Making Space

Suzanne: Can you share how to bring the practice of tea into your life for someone that is listening for the first time and doesn't have accessibility to living tea or plantation tea?

Wu De: The first thing to bring anything into your life is to make space for it, that's how you show up, that's how you show spirit that you're ready. If you're walking down the street and every cell in your body tells you to go into that shop and you don't go because you got a meeting to get to and then you get home that night and you pray for God to give you guidance, and God is like, "What do you mean? I just gave you guidance. You don't have space for guidance."

Or you make your life into a cluster of phone calls and emails and you're just running around hectic all the time, 7 days a week and then you pray for peace, where to put this peace? You demonstrate to the universe that you're ready for peace when you make space for peace in your life. There is an old Tibetan saying that cultivating the space for meditation is the primary meditation. It doesn't matter what your meditation practice is if you don't have space and time to meditate and you'll probably quit because you won't get any results.

If you want living tea to find you, then you make space in your life; you create time in your day for tea drinking. Tea drinking doesn't have to be complicated. The oldest method of brewing is to take a bowl, start brewing, and add water; it's really that simple.

In the morning, it's such an amazing way to start the day and the first note of the symphony sets the tone for the entire symphony and if you start your day in a frenzy, then it's probably going to have that momentum. You can change that momentum but it's going to be difficult. My philosophy is being before doing. Create space for being and then out of that being comes doing.

Suzanne: Can share the ability to be able to receive from something, be it tea or meditation? How does tea welcome us to receive and be present in our daily life?

Wu De: In essence, creating space externally and internally is the same thing. If you seek abundance in your life, you make space for it on the outside, but you also have to make space for it in the inside. You make space in your heart to receive. It's more of an orientation. How you relate to the issue is the issue.

There is no other issue other than how you're relating. You don't have power over this universe and you can't change it and prevent unwanted things from happening or make only wanted things happen.

People spend so much time trying to orient the world to suit their vision. It's much more skillful to orient your vision to suit the world and to learn to accept and be with what it and begin to receive its messages.

Suzanne: You're a beautiful listener. Can you share the value of listening and of asking questions versus sharing first about self and what occurs in those spaces?

Wu De: Listening is a challenging topic. An Emerson quote said, "It took my five years to learn to speak the English language and 52 years to learn to hear it." Beyond language, listening is also about not listening to what someone is saying from their mouth but to what their heart is saying.

When a baby comes into a room, everyone goes over and hugs that baby and kisses that baby. I have achieved way more than that baby has. I have thousands more accolades than he does but no one is pinching my cheeks and hugging me in that way. It's because people are constantly trying to show you what they're not, and the baby is just what it is and there is something divine about that, it's about just being who you are.

Listening is sometimes listening for who someone really is; it's not what they're saying about who they are. Listening is holding space and allowing someone to process and it has this deeper aspect, where it's about getting to what is meaningful, beneath the surface, beneath the external mask, and understanding what they really want and how to help them achieve that.

Kanchan: What is the role of simplicity in connecting to your inner self?

Wu De: Simplicity is reduction. If you hand me two objects of different sizes and shapes and you ask me to stack them on top of each other, I can do it, a five year old can do it, and you can even do it unconsciously. But if you hand me 37 objects of different sizes and shapes and you ask me to stack those on top of each other, only a great grand master stacker who has been doing it for eons is going to be able to do that. The average person is just not and everything is going to fall down and the fact is that things in our life are different sizes, shapes, and colors and if you're having trouble stacking them, you're trying to stack too many things. Reduce to your capacity. If your capacity is 5, anything above five is just going to fall down and cause stress for you. But I would say don't just reduce to five; you should reduce to 3.

You have to have space in your life for the things you don't even know about yet. There are things you're going to encounter that are completely out of your navigation, you've never heard of them before. Maybe even this conversation about tea is something new. Where do you put this new, inspiring painting that motivates you to be a better version of yourself? Where do you put it if you don't have any wall space? Simplicity is conducive to growth.

Prakash: What have been your personal challenges?

Wu De: For me, it's very easy to choose simplicity. I can very easily go off into the mountains and not say another word. For me the challenge is to be in the world. You know five years ago, if I were attending a party in Los Angeles and someone started talking to me about something that was ultimately nonsense, I struggled with how to relate to this human being and I would just shut down. I've gotten so much better and I can even respond in those situations with loving kindness and I can be an ordinary person. The challenge is to be in the world because I don't want to escape like that; my heart doesn't want that.

I recognize that any amount of mastery is useless unless it's of service to humankind because I'm the left hand and you're the right hand and we rise up together or we don't rise up at all. You can't achieve mastery of anything unless it's not in service to mankind.

Suzanne: Can you offer us a virtual bowl of tea?

Wu De: My heart is filled with tea. In China, the elixir of life is called morning dew. I wish all of you a thousand bowls of tea, and each one, the morning dew.