

The Deep Integration of Tea and Zen: A Focus on the Character of Tea

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Abstract. Tea and Zen are rooted in the deep integration of tea and Zen, and the two are closely aligned because of their suitability. For Zen, it is the practicality, secularism and Sinicism, distinguishing from the original Buddhism, that make it more compatible with tea. For tea, among the many cultural mediums of Zen, tea character stands out. The purpose of this paper is to explain how tea and Zen are closely related, using tea character as an example. Focusing on the relationship between tea character and Zen, this paper provides unique points of view, which rid of the traditional philosophical analyse on Tea-Zen concepts but pay attention to pragmatic nature of tea, decoding “tea” in four dimensions such as the herbal use, the ritual use, the echo with Zen, and its propagation bond with Zen’s growth. In conclusion, tea shares a genuine cultural symbiosis with Zen, and tea character is the main fuel of Zen’s popularisation. Tea helps to build the bridge between Zen theories and the reality world.

Keywords: Oneness of Tea and Zen; Zen; tea character.

1. Introduction

As the Japanese Tea Ceremony has gradually become an internationally renowned cultural phenomenon, “Tea and Zen” have become an eye-catching synonym for Eastern aesthetics. In recent years, the preservation of Chinese non-heritage culture has also witnessed a great progress on uncovering China’s own value as the origin of tea culture. However, there remains much confusion among the public about the boundaries between Chinese and Japanese tea ceremonies. Moreover, the understanding of “Tea and Zen” is often limited to a lifestyle characterized by “elegance”. It is barely recognized that how tea stood out from other material carriers of Zen and gave rise to such a time-honoured academic theme as “Oneness of Tea and Zen”, which transcends religion, aesthetics, botany, history, and folklore.

In order to have an understanding of “Oneness of Tea and Zen”, it should first be clear what is tea and what is Zen, and how the two are closely integrated then complement each other. The purpose of this paper is to dismantle the association between tea and Zen, then to explain how the tea characters play a significant role in Zen’s development. Historical evidence is provided to help understanding.

2. What Is “Oneness of Tea and Zen”?

Academics are divided on the perception of “Oneness of Dhyana (also known as Zen) and tea”. Regarding the relationship between tea and Zen, Gu Wen, in her study of the Meiji period, suggests that tea and Zen are juxtaposed and mutually inclusive, “using tea to perceive Zen’s wisdom and realising Zen through the tea behaviours” [1]. In addition, some scholars believe that, though tea and Zen differ in forms and functions, they are both manifestations of the same spiritual kernel, sharing the same destination [2]. The majority agrees that the naming order of “Tea-Zen” or “Zen-Tea” should not be over-emphasised. Tea-Zen studies are not supposed to show strong separateness, contrary to the spirit of Zen [3].

Regarding the “Oneness”, modern Japanese tea ceremony researchers suggest that tea activity is one of the Zen practices, and “the tea pioneers who liberated Zen from temples into the tea lounge” succeeded a “great religious revolution” [4]. “Oneness of Zen and tea” means “to taste Zen in tea, to understand tea in Zen’s way. Tea activity is a path to Zen, and a start of enlightening one’s mind [5]”.

Tea not only belongs to the Zen practice, but also is beneficial to reach a deeper level of spiritual sublimation. The Tea-Zen book of Zong Dan supposed that “Tea crafts is all based on the Zen method, and the key is to know our own nature”, which seized the tea ceremony as a way of Zen cultivation. According to Zong Dan, “Oneness of Tea and Zen” should also be understood as the “Tea Ceremony”.

Nowadays, Chinese academics have also pointed out that “Oneness of Tea and Zen” should be the goal of Tea-Zen practice, and a realm that will only be reached after enlightenment [6]. Tea learning is one of the most effective ways. As mentioned above, it is widely agreed that “Tea-Zen” aims to sharpen one’s mind through the highly repetitive ceremonial acts, “nurturing healthy bodies and cultivating good temper”, and ultimately reaches a certain level of Zen. Zen has always advocated that reliance on verbal education is dangerous. Oppositely, Zen is in favour of unusual behaviours which help people pierce the fake and into the truth. The aim is to help people away from delusion and see through to the essence of things, and tea is one of the ways to break down delusion and reveal Zen.

On how to understand the “Oneness of Dhyana and tea”, the academic community has a variety of opinions. But if only from the perspective of cultural development, the author argues that it is merely a way of interpreting Zen, dramatically affected by Chinese tea culture. Tea contains the thought of Zen, Zen and tea share a spiritual connection. Though independent respectively, a symbiotic relationship has formed due to the need for cultural dissemination. Thanks to Zen, tea has enriched its own theories and exempted from the fate of being eliminated as an agricultural product. Because of tea, Zen not only solved the physical needs of meditation, but also found a suitable intermediary for its abstraction. As a result, Zen has become more “approachable” for the masses. It is tea that has accelerated Zen’s popularisation in the secular world and added new vitality to its development.

3. “Tea and Zen” Are Not Identical to “Tea and Buddhism”

In order to understand “Tea and Zen”, and to understand why the “Tea and Zen” definition share a controversial image in the academic community, first of all should be to understand how Zen and tea are closely integrated. In order to understand the formation of Tea-Zen culture, it is necessary to have some recognition of the differences primarily between Zen Buddhism and original Buddhism.

The origin of Zen Buddhism in China was Bodhidharma, then carried forward by the Southern Hui Neng. It is said that “the mind sees the nature” and “the mind is Buddha”, that everyone can become a Buddha, and that everyone has a Buddha’s heart. If one wants to pursue the practice of becoming a Buddha, worshipping and making offerings of incense is not the optimal way and idolatry is even more despicable. It is necessary to “point directly to the true heart”, from the origin of the heart. The practice that is most conducive to the exploration of the true heart is “Zen”, or “Zenna”, which is a kind of meditative thinking activity. Zen is a meditation activity, where the mind is extracted from the mortal body in the “stillness” and “determination”, then back into the vastness of the universe. The Buddha nature is realised by this process. Hatamarash translates it as “spiritual practice”, and in the writing of Venerable Xuan Zang, it is also “Thoughts in stillness”.

It is widely believed that Zen is an extremely localised form of Buddhism, and some scholars have even suggested that Zen is more like a traditional philosophical school than Buddhism. The reason is the high degree of harmony between Zen culture and local Chinese philosophy, such as “nature” and “non-action” advocated by Taoism. Zen is “wisdom without awareness and separation without deliberation”, and “action without action and execution without execution” [7], which is the act of no contrivance. A few of the Zen schools use the crude destruction of idols and the killing of living beings as a means of enlightenment, which is coincidentally similar to Zhuang Zhou’s act of celebrating his wife’s transcendence with drums and music. In its later development, Zen also incorporated several elements of Confucianism, such as the encouragement of filial piety to parents and courtesy to others, which can also be seen as an important course in the development of Zen’s secularisation. Nowadays, Zen continues to maintain a strong intellectual vitality by closely integrating with new aspects of each era, with flowers, with bushido, with archery, with jujitsu, with

origami, with zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting, and with the millennia-old culture of tea. From cultural integration perspective, tea and Zen are precisely the embodiment of the same spirit in two different dimensions, the real and the imaginary, and both indeed the expressions of Zen.

The formation of Tea and Zen culture marked the departure of Zen from “Indian stasis” and its transformation from the traditional accepting offerings to a lifestyle of self-cultivation as well as self-production [8]. The famous monk Huai Hai used to add “one day without work, one day without eat” into his implementation. In the rules of the monastery, tea planting, tea picking, tea processing should all be completed by the Zen monks. Designed in accordance with democratic principles, every monk needs to take on those “Miscellaneous work”. The fact that the tea-making process was carried out by all monks, regardless of their seniority and status, is a testimony to the dynamic practice of Zen’s creed “unity of notion and action”. What is more, it draws on the small-scale peasant economy that characterises the traditional Chinese society, while embodying the notion of the equality of all beings.

Zen Buddhism is concerned about the present life and is not ashamed of discovering the products of the present world as the carrier of its own spirit, “tea” is one of these carriers. Zen advocates seeing the grand from the trivial, and “recognises that the mundane world is as important as the spiritual” [9]. This is precisely what distinguishes Zen from the original Buddhism, which aspires to the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss and forgets about the real world. Zen also manifests itself in its emphasis on the present life by encompassing sitting, lying, walking, and talking in the way Zen practitioners practice and realise Zen. Earning one’s living is also one of these practices, as is practicing tea crafts.

In the cultural imagery related to Buddhism, there are many images of animals and plants that are closely related to Buddhist legends and stories, including animals such as the nine-coloured deer, the Kalavinka bird, the common elephant, the dolphin, the ox, the white lion, etc. As for plants, there are the lotus flower, the Asoka tree, and even the Golden Brahmana mentioned as the origin of the Zen Buddhist “smiling with a flick of the finger”, etc. However, none of these images can be compared to tea, since whose bond with Zen is of such a tightness. Tea and Zen also have helped to enrich each other’s content, establishing a strong foundation for secularisation. In short, Zen’s inclusiveness and eclectic style provided a suitable habitat for tea culture, and with Zen being welcomed in the upper class, the statue of tea also rose. If it is not combined with Zen culture, neither the way combined with literature nor with traditional Chinese medicine would be capable to reach the heights of sanctity. Zen to tea, more than Buddhism, the reality of “Bo Le (the most famous talent scout in ancient China)”.

4. Tea Is the Embodiment of Zen Thought and Aesthetics

The reason why Zen has a soft spot for tea is that tea has an innate aura that fits Zen. Tea production does belong to the Zen cultivation, and the tea rituals did originate from the Zen temple. However, the cultural attributes of tea itself are the main reason to promote the combination of tea and Zen. From the very beginning, tea is only a crop that meets the qualities of Zen and embodies its spiritual pursuit, but later, wondering why Zen and tea are closely related has become an entrance to explore Zen. Tea is supposed to be one of the most prominent among all the material vehicles of Zen.

4.1. The Medicinal Value of Tea Is Conducive to Clearing the Mind and Calming the Body

The Chinese people’s cognition of tea began with its medicinal value. Ancient books often describe tea as a wake-up call, a beneficial drink which enhance physical fitness and effective to drive fever or cold away. “The Classic of Tea” mentioned “tea, cold in nature, most suitable for self-restraint people” [10], “Guangya” supposed “its drink to sober up, to help people not fall asleep”. With the medicinal value is widely broadcasted, persistent tea drinking is considered more effective. “Shennong Food Classic” said tea functions as a medicine in “strengthening physical fitness, pleasing to the mind”. Hua Tuo “Food theory” also agreed that “bitter tea to take for a long period may facilitate human’s mental health”.

Tea also does a good help for meditation. Zen asserts that the nature of heart will only become perceptible when the mind is clear, and one of the main ways is to “sit in meditation and observe your

mind". As is said, Zen practitioners should concentrate on themselves to achieve Zen enlightenment, however, sitting for hours in meditation is indeed a great challenge for the monks' willpower and physical strength. Drinking tea does function as an important means to invigorate their mind, to ensure the quality of meditation. In the Jing Dynasty, tea is widely introduced to the sangha so that their meditation would not be affected by "drowsiness" and "sleepiness". "Jinshu - Art Biography" mentioned a man called Shan Daokai, who lived in Dunhuang area and could quickly adapt to the extreme cold and heat. The secret of his health was tea drinking. It is tea that make his way to visit Zhaode Temple with consciousness. Buddhists also summarized the "three virtues" of tea: one for refreshing, two for digestion, three for restraining the sexual desire.

4.2. Tea as a Ritualistic Symbol of Respect

In the Southern Song Dynasty, a novel called "The Garden of bizarre" mentions that the Chen's widowed wife who showed a favour on tea and lived with her two sons, used to make tea offerings to the ancient mound in her courtyard before drinking. The two sons did not agree with their mother's behaviour, believing that the mound was unconscious and did not need to be ritually treated with such care. The mother had no choice but to stop.

However, in the night, she dreamt of a man who claimed to be in this mound for more than 300 years. He emphasized that it is the protection and persistence of high-quality tea offering touched his mind. As a reward, 100,000 coins appeared in the dawn, right in the middle of the courtyard. It is clearly in the story, that the ghost of the ancient mound shows a great gratitude towards the Chen's widowed wife for her tea rituals and gives heavy money in return. The two sons against his mother's behaviour, not only because of the idea that the ancient mound is dead, "no spirit, no awareness", but also because of the viewpoint of the tea ceremony from the rituals and customs have a relatively solemn meaning, and tea offering is not an insignificant act. In the folklore, tea offering means respect and generosity.

In Zen monasteries, Temple tea is also divided into "Dien Cha", "Precept Tea", "Pu Cha" and so on according to different purposes. For instance, "Dien tea" is prepared for the offerings to Buddha, "Pu tea" is for the monks, "Precepts tea" is given out according to the order of precepts [11]. Liu Zhenliang of the Tang Dynasty tea's "ten virtues": "tea dispersal of depression, tea to drive away sleep...tea beneficial to reach Ren, tea to show respect...tea can show the path to Truth, tea used for enhancement of the aesthetic", tea's utility for rituals has become a consensus.

This habitual impression of "respect" is not only related to the fact that tea was usually circulated among the noble class for drinking, but also relies on the famous Luyu. His "The Classic of Tea" transformed tea from a product into a spiritual pursuit. Wine became the contrary for tea, and the cultural meanings implied by drinking wine and tea, by wine banquets and tea banquets, were already different. The sensualism, indulgence, and extravagance represented by wine contrasted with the rationality, sobriety, frugality, and simplicity represented by tea. One is based on a luxury number of grains, while the other is offered naturally. The population of tea was inherited from the pre-Tang history to Lu Yu's masterpiece, and in later generations tea was gradually detached from a pure material, rose to a symbol of "Ya" ("elegance").

4.3. Tea as a Symbol of Nature and Zen Practices

Tea itself is endowed with cultural symbols, i.e. anthropomorphic "character", which is in line with the ideological realm promoted by Zen Buddhism. Firstly, the tea itself is grown in the mountains and fields, with a natural flavour, which conforms to the Zen aesthetics of simplicity, truthfulness and naturalness. Tea leaves naturally have a wide variety of flavours, and nearly all the methods to cook tea are made up of natural materials. This is exactly the way of cooking and the ingredients that Zen food culture prefers. Secondly, the tea picking needs workers to walk deep into forest or mountains, and its quality is closely related to the timing of picking. Tea tends to evaluate the quality of their product considering the time of harvest. "Tea in the solar term Jingzhe, in urgent need of picking" [3], the picking work usually starts from Jingzhe. "Tea Tasting Record" depicted the Jingzhe tea as

“buds crawling as the eagle’s claw”. Longjing green tea, for example, the top grade is picked before the Qingming solar term, then before Guyu. Cai Xiang stated in the “Tea Record” that the best time for tea picking should be “five days before Guyu”, flavour would get worse day by day. The enormous difference in taste is merely a matter of one night. To summarise, tea is a creation of time and nature.

Zen Buddhism is not only concerned with nature and origin, but also with seasonality. “Everything going impermanently and all dharmas containing no ego” is the Buddhist “general explanation of all in the universe” [12], also the “Dharma seal” and the passport to the true Buddha’s teachings. This process is dependent on the law of cause and effect, which is not able to be interfered by any force, not even the power of the Buddhas of the three epochs. When it is projected to the real world, sensitivity to seasonal transitions plays a role as the reflection of the Zen concept of “impermanence”. Natural seasons determine the maturation and cycle of vegetation. Each seasonal period witness different spirits in the destiny of cause and effect. Tea that strictly follows the laws of the season is a projection of the concept of impermanence. The act of picking and making tea according to the seasons is natural and unobtrusive, which is in line with Zen’s original intention. Zen believes that every action in real life is a practice, so there is no doubt that tea culture is a Zen perception of impermanence.

The production of tea is also considered to be a kind of cultivation. First, tea flavour is mostly bitter with a little sweet, the term “subsequent sweetness” is commonly used for tea appreciation. The flavour of tea is gradually revealed, just as a man’s practice of enlightenment, initially the “eight bitterness”, then detached from worries and obsessions, finally enter the realm of being unoccupied and the utmost “sweet”. Second, tea must go through a dozen various processes to make original herbs into edible tea, which contains the steps of being crushed, steamed, fried, drained and roasted. In “Taste Zen in Tea”, it is argued that every individual in secular world has been tortured by the “five desires” of greed, anger, dementia, indolence and doubt, but has finally achieved enlightenment. Both cultivation and tea “are a form of devotion.”

5. Combining with Tea Accelerates the Secularisation of Zen and Preserves the Vitality of Zen

“The Classic of Tea” mentioned, “tea, a kind of salutary plants output in the southern China”. Zhougong Dan describe tea as “Plants taste bitter”. Tea for drinking has been developed since Shennong’s era, but the first discovery to make tea drinking a fashion goes for the Bashu area of the southwestern China. Guo Pu “Erya Note” wrote, “trees small as the gardenia...leaves can be spoiled to drink...habitants of Shu named it as Bitter tea (Tu)”. After the Han Dynasty, Tea was exported to the Yellow River Basin following the culture of Ba Shu, then gradually become the usual drinks. “The Classic of Tea” also explains, “Nowadays tea drinking has immersed in the custom, prevalent in the capital cities. The aroma of tea spreads not only among the dwellings of Chang’an and Luoyang, but also in the Southwest area”. Clearly, the custom of drinking tea was particularly widespread at that time. There is no doubt the popularity of tea would be able to lay a solid foundation for the spread of Zen.

Although tea has been exploited for long, it is actually the tea ceremony propelled by the Zen temples who realize tea’s development as an aesthetic interest and a cultural custom deep into the upper class. “Feng’s Journal” refer to a demon master of Taishan Lingyan Temple, who devoted to promoting Zen during Kaiyuan years, “Only tea is allowed in Zen learning while the sleep and food are all forbidden. Hence, monks usually take the tea everywhere for drinking convenience, and from then on to follow suit, and then became a custom. As a beverage, consumption is the basic function. But when tea is added with the value of the symbolic meaning, tea will become a new custom and ritual, a new cultural creation. The emphasis Zen monastery put on the tea ceremony accelerate its popularisation. Tea usage can be briefly classified as Dien tea, Precept tea, etc., and according to different forms of puja arrangement, tea and fruits would be provided in different combinations. Tea is always an essential part of Zen temples, no matter whether it is for the monk’s daily life or

ceremonial occasions [13]. Dozens of records about tea have been offered by the monastic regulations, and there is even a single chapter dedicated to “what to obey in the tea ceremony”, which points out that “Special tea soup prepared by the Zen temples, courtesy of the heavy, the person invited should not be slow and easy!”, depicting a picture the hosts and guests in a tea party need to follow the norms of etiquette. Firstly, the tea ceremony is already a commonplace ritual in the Zen sect. Secondly, the Zen Sect often manages tea ceremonies or tea parties, whose guests scattering over the society. Obviously, it has become a trend.

The important promoters of the Chinese and Japanese tea ceremonies were also both tea culture constructors and Zen practitioners. In terms of craftsmanship, the Zen monks were also experts in improving the varieties of famous tea and introducing new ones, for instance, Tieganyin tea was named by the Zen monks. The “Dayun Temple Tea Poem” recorded Lu Yan’s praise, “The jade-like stamens can be called as a masterpiece, Monks’ tea-making skills are exquisite indeed”. From the perspective of cultural development, the Chinese tea pursuers penetrated in the scribes and monks, the number of huge, seems unaccountable. “Sage of Tea” Lu Yu was raised in a Zen temple since childhood, although young had been attracted by Confucianism, both his temperament and conduct were immersed in the Zen advocating style. The monograph “The Classic of Tea” wrote by Lu Yu is the world’s first tea monograph, exerted an unimaginable influence on Tea-Zen culture in Eastern Asia. Lu Yu’s friend, the “poet” monk Jiao Ran, was also an outstanding tea artist. Moreover, Lu Tong and the “Seven bowls of tea” poem are known as the writing of “A night of the Spring” in the tea world, which manifestly superior among other masterpieces of Tang Dynasty. Over the past thousand years, “Lu Tong’s enjoyment of tea” has been favoured by plenty of scribes and artists, being preserved as a classic theme to express their fondness for nature as well as the heart of seclusion.

Not to mention the large number of tea sangha members, the spread of tea in Japan can be attributed firstly to the Tang Zhengyuan period monks Kouzou, and later to Kukai, who studied at Seiryuji Temple. After Zen Master Eisai, who popularised the efficacy of eating tea, the important founders of the Japanese tea ceremony, such as Murata Jumitsu, Takeno Shououou, and Chirikyū, inherited the mantle of Zen and rigorously as well as the Zen Tea Dharma of the Jingshan Monastery in China.

The nowadays status of “Ryu Yuan Goh” is a proof of how the Japanese tea ceremony values “Tea and Zen” as its orthodoxy. The design of Japan’s “Kusoan Tea Rooms” and “Tea Room Spaces”, as they are known to this day, came from the mastermind Chirikyū, who used the Buddhist name “Soyi” for nearly all his life. The name “Rikyū”, more familiar to later generations, was not passed down until the late years of his life, when it was conferred by the emperor. Virtually, not only existing numerous sangha willing to shoulder the responsibility of cultural reproduction, but the Japanese tea ceremony culture also recognised itself as a part of Zen, glad to join the Zen elements in its aesthetic appeal. Although the Japanese tea ceremony in modern times has gradually established its own independent system, the Zen notions and aesthetics are still active in the design of tearoom space or tea ceremony. It is in this process of secularisation that the vitality of Zen Buddhism takes on a new lease of life.

6. Conclusion

“Oneness of Tea and Zen” is a way of understanding caused by culture collision of an abstract philosophical concept and a natural being. Its interpretation can neither be independent of Zen nor separate from tea. Tea-Zen itself could be translated into a reflection of the Chinese Zen’s spirit “out of the world and into the world”, and its cultural connotation has been continuously enriched on the basis of the accumulative research for Tea-Zen.

In this process, Tea and Zen are closely bonded with each other. Zen is the key to the transformation of tea culture from the material to the spiritual form, and Tea is the utmost medium of Zen’s secularisation. Tea-Zen culture grows in the vein of tea, contains the exploration, thinking, experiencing and perception of Zen. Tea-Zen is actually an extension of endless thoughts.

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