

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TEA

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BY digging into the records of the Orient, as set forth by a present day Oriental writer, one can uncover "Treasure Trove" concerning "Teaism" or "The Philosophy of Tea". In the centuries before and after the Christian era, poets and philosophers of the Far East glorified the tea cult as an Asiatic ceremonial. As a consequence, teaism permeated the elegance of noble boudoirs and entered the abode of the humble. All down the centuries of civilization in China, it became common parlance to speak of the man "with no tea in him" as one unsusceptible to the serio-comic aspects of experience, and of the untamed aesthete running riot in his emotions as one "with too much tea in him". On the other hand, in the liquid amber within the ivory porcelain, the initiated may touch the sweet reticence of Confucius, the piquancy of Laotse and the ethereal aroma of Sakyamuni himself. They find a subtle charm in the taste of tea, for it has not the arrogance of wine, the self-consciousness of coffee, nor the simpering innocence of cocoa. Teaism is the art of concealing beauty that you may discover it; suggesting what you dare not reveal. It is the noble secret of laughing at yourself, calmly yet thoroughly, and is thus humor itself, the smile of philosophy. All genuine humorists may in this sense be called tea-philosophers:—Thackeray and, of course, Shakespeare. Lichihlai, a poet of the Sung Dynasty, remarked that there were three most deplorable things in the world. The spoiling of fine youths through false education, the degradation of fine paintings through vulgar admiration, and the utter waste of fine tea through incompetent manipulation.

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Like Art, Tea has its periods and its schools. Its evolution may be roughly divided into three main stages: the Boiled Tea, the Whipped Tea, the Steeped Tea. The Cake-tea was boiled, the Powder-tea was whipped, and the Leaf-tea was steeped.

The tea plant, a native of Southern China, is alluded to in the Chinese classics as possessing the virtue of relieving fatigue, delighting the soul, strengthening the will, and repairing the eyesight. It was not only administered as an internal dose, but often applied externally as a paste to alleviate pain. The Buddhists used it extensively to prevent drowsiness during their long hours of meditation.

Luwuh, tutelary god of Chinese tea merchants, a poet born in the age when Buddhism and other religions were seeking mutual synthesis, saw in the tea-service the same harmony and order which reigned through all things.

In his celebrated work the "Chaking" (The Holy Scripture of Tea) he explained that the best quality of tea leaves must have "creases like the leathern boot of the Tartar horseman, curl like the dewlap of a mighty bullock, and unfold like the mist rising out of a ravine, gleam like a lake touched by a zephyr, and be wet and soft like fine earth newly swept by rain".

Another poet, Lotung wrote:

The first cup moistens my lips and throat, the second cup breaks my loneliness, the third cup searches my barren entrail, but to find therein some five thousand volumes of odd ideographs. The fourth cup raises a slight perspiration,—all the wrong of life passes away through my pores. At the fifth cup I am purified; the sixth cup calls me to the realms of immortals. The seventh cup—Ah, but I could take no more! I only feel the breath of cool wind that rises in my sleeves. The Chinese Elysium. Let me ride on this sweet breeze and waft away thither.

In later centuries there developed, under teaism, a famous cult known as teamasters. Among these were Rikui and his successors, noted for the development for the art of flower arrangement in connection with the ceremony of teaism. Flower stories, in this connection are endless; the one in relation to Rikui has a peculiar tragic grandeur. Seeking always to be in harmony with the great rhythm of the universe, he like all great teamasters was ever prepared to enter the unknown. Long had been the friendship between Rikui and Taieko-Hideyoski, and high the estimation in which this great warrior held the teamaster. But the friendship of a despot is ever a dangerous honor. It was an age rife with treachery, and men trusted not even their nearest kin. Rikui was no servile courtier, and often dared to differ in argument with his fierce patron. Taking advantage of the coldness which had for some time existed between these two, the enemies of the latter accused him of being implicated in a conspiracy to poison the despot. It was whispered to Hideyoski that the fatal potion was to be administered to him with a cup of the green beverage prepared by the teamasters. But suspicion with the great warrior was sufficient ground for execution, and there was no appeal from the will of the angry ruler. One privilege alone was granted to

the condemned, the honour of dying by his own hand. On the day destined for his self-immolation, Rikui invited his chief disciples to the last tea-ceremony. Mournfully at the appointed time the guests met at the portico. As they look into the garden path, trees seem to shudder, and in the rustling of their leaves are heard the whispers of the ghosts. A wave of rare incense is wafted from the tea-room; it is the summons which bids the guests to enter. One by one they advance and take their places. In the tokonoma hangs a kakemono—a wonderful writing by an ancient monk dealing with the evanescence of all earthly things. The singing kettle, as it boils over the brazier, sounds like some cicada pouring forth his woes to departing summer. Soon the host enters the room. Each in turn is served with tea, and each in turn silently drains his cup, the host last of all. According to established etiquette, the chief guest now asks permission to examine the tea-equipage. Rikui places the various articles before them, with the kakemono. After all have expressed admiration of their beauty, Rikui presents one of them to each of the assembled company as a souvenir. The bowl alone he keeps. "Never again shall this cup, polluted by the lips of misfortune, be used by man." He speaks, and breaks the vessel into fragments.

The ceremony is over; the guests, with difficulty restraining their tears, take their last farewell and leave the room. One only, the nearest and dearest, is requested to remain and witness the end. Rikui, then removes his tea-gown and carefully folds it upon the mat, thereby disclosing the immaculate white death robe which it has hitherto concealed. Tenderly he gazes on the shining blade of the fatal dagger, and with a smile upon his face, Rikui passed forth into the unknown.