

TEA CEREMONY

The Way of Tea



Tea ceremony
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

The tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), which is also known as the Way of Tea (*chado* or *sado*), is the ritualized preparation and serving of powdered green tea in the presence of guests. A full-length formal tea ceremony involves a meal (*chakaiseki*) and two servings of tea (*koicha* and *usucha*) and lasts approximately four hours, during which the host engages his whole being in the creation of an occasion designed to bring aesthetic, intellectual, and physical enjoyment and peace of mind to the guests.

To achieve this, the tea host or hostess may spend decades mastering not only the measured procedures for serving tea in front of guests, but also learning to appreciate art,

crafts, poetry, and calligraphy; learning to arrange flowers, cook, and care for a garden; and at the same time instilling in himself or herself grace, selflessness, and attentiveness to the needs of others.

Though all efforts of the host are directed towards the enjoyment of the participants, this is not to say that the Way of Tea is a self-indulgent pastime for guests. The ceremony is equally designed to humble participants by focusing attention both on the profound beauty of the simplest aspects of nature—such as light, the sound of water, and the glow of a charcoal fire (all emphasized in the rustic tea hut setting)—and on the creative force of the universe as manifested through

human endeavor, for example in the crafting of beautiful objects.

Conversation in the tearoom is focused on these subjects. The guests will not engage in small talk or gossip, but limit their conversation to a discussion of the origin of utensils and praise for the beauty of natural manifestations.

The objective of a tea gathering is that of Zen Buddhism—to live in this moment—and the entire ritual is designed to focus the senses so that one is totally involved in the occasion and not distracted by mundane thoughts.

People may wonder if a full-length formal tea ceremony is something that Japanese do at home regularly for relaxation. This is not the case. It is rare in Japan now that a person has the luxury of owning a tea house or the motivation to entertain in one. Entertaining with the tea ritual has always been, with the exception of the Buddhist priesthood, the privilege of the elite.

However, ask if there are many people in Japan who study the Way of Tea, and the answer is yes, there are millions—men and women, rich and poor—belonging to a hundred or more different tea persuasions in every corner of Japan. Every week, all year round, they go to their teacher for two hours at a time, sharing their class with three or four others. Each takes turns preparing tea and playing the role of a guest. Then they go home and come again the following week to do the same, many for their whole lives.

In the process, the tea student learns not only how to make tea, but also how to make the perfect charcoal fire; how to look after utensils and prepare the powdered tea; how to appreciate art, poetry, pottery, lacquerware, wood craftsmanship, and gardens; and how to recognize all the wild flowers and in which season they bloom. They learn how to deport themselves in a *tatami* (rush-covered straw mat) room and to always think of others first.

The teacher discourages learning from a book and makes sure all movements are learned with the body and not with the brain. The traditional arts—tea, calligraphy, flower arranging, and the martial arts—were all originally taught without texts or manuals. The goal is not the intellectual grasp of a subject, but the attainment of presence of mind.

Each week there are slight variations in the routine, dictated by the utensils and the season, to guard against students becoming complacent in their practice. The student is reminded that the Way of Tea is not a course of study that has to be finished, but life itself. There are frequent opportunities for students to attend tea gatherings, but it does not matter if the student never goes to a formal four-hour *chaji*—the culmination of all they have learned—because it is the process of learning that counts: the tiny accumulation of knowledge, the gradual fine-tuning of the sensibilities, and the small but satisfying improvements in the ability to cope gracefully with the little dramas of the everyday world. The power of the tea ritual lies in the unfurling of self-realization.

History of the Way of Tea and Development of *Wabi-cha*

After being imported from China, green tea came to be drunk in monasteries and the mansions of the aristocracy and ruling warrior elite from about the 12th century. Tea was first drunk as a form of medicine and was imbibed in the monasteries as a means of keeping awake during meditation. Early forms of the tea ceremony were largely occasions for the ostentatious display of precious utensils in grand halls or for noisy parties in which the participants guessed the origins of different teas. Finally through the influence of Zen Buddhist masters of the 14th and 15th centuries, the procedures for the serving of tea in front of guests were developed into the spiritually uplifting form in which millions of students practice the Way of Tea in different schools today.

One 15th-century Zen master in particular—Murata Juko (1423–1502)—broke all convention to perform the tea ritual for an aristocratic audience in a humble four-and-a-half-mat room. The tea master who perfected the ritual was Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591). Rikyu was the son of a rich merchant in Sakai, near Osaka, the most prosperous trading port in Japan in the 16th century. His background brought him into contact with the tea ceremonies of the rich, but he became more interested in the way priests approached the

Drinking of the tea

After receiving the bowl, the guest places it in the left hand, steadying it with the right. The guest gives a silent bow of thanks and turns the “face” of the bowl away from his or her lips before drinking. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

tea ritual as an embodiment of Zen principles for appreciating the sacred in everyday life. Taking a cue from Juko’s example, Rikyu stripped everything non-essential from the tearoom and the style of preparation, and developed a tea ritual in which there was no wasted movement and no object that was superfluous.

Instead of using expensive imported vessels in a lavish reception hall, he made tea in a thatched hut using only a simple iron kettle, a plain lacquered container for tea, a tea scoop and whisk whittled from bamboo, and a common rice bowl for drinking the tea.

The only decoration in a Rikyu-style tearoom is a hanging scroll or a vase of flowers placed in the alcove. Owing to the very lack of decoration, participants become more aware of details and are awakened to the simple beauty around them and to themselves.

The central essence of Rikyu’s tea ceremony was the concept of *wabi*. *Wabi* literally means “desolation.” Zen philosophy takes the positive side of this and says that the greatest wealth is found in desolation and poverty, because we look inside ourselves and find true spiritual wealth there when we have no attachments to things material. His style of tea is thus called *wabi-cha*.

After Rikyu’s death, his grandson and later three great-grandsons carried on the Rikyu style of tea. Meanwhile, variations on *wabi-cha* grew up under the influence of certain *samurai* lords, whose elevated status required them to employ more sophisticated accoutrements and more elaborate manners and procedures than the simple *wabi-cha*. New schools developed, but the *wabi-cha* spirit can be said to be central to all. When the warrior class was abolished in Japan’s modern era (beginning in 1868), women became the main practitioners of tea. The tea ceremony was something that every young woman was required to study to cultivate fine manners and aesthetic appreciation. At the same time, political and business leaders and art collectors used tea as a vehicle for collecting and enjoying fine art and crafts.

The largest of all the tea schools today are Urasenke and Omotesenke, founded by two of Rikyu’s great-grandsons. Under their influence and that of certain other major



schools, the Way of Tea is now being taught around the world, while in Japan both men and women are reappraising the value of the Way of Tea as a valuable system for attaining mastery of life.

A Tea Gathering

At a full-length formal tea ceremony (*chaji*), the guests first gather in a waiting room where they are served a cup of the hot water that will be used for making tea later on. They then proceed to an arbor in the garden and wait to be greeted by the host. This takes the form of a silent bow at the inner gate. Guests then proceed to a stone wash basin where they purify their hands and mouths with water and enter the tearoom through a low entrance, designed to remind them that all are equal.

Guests admire the hanging scroll in the alcove, which is usually the calligraphy of a Zen Buddhist priest, and take their seats, kneeling on the *tatami* ((rush-covered straw mat) floor. After the prescribed greetings, the host adds charcoal to the fire and serves a simple meal of seasonal foods, just enough to take away the pangs of hunger. This is followed by moist sweets.

Guests then return to the arbor and wait to be called again for the serving of tea. The tea container, tea scoop, and tea bowl are wiped in a symbolic purification, the rhythmic motions of which put the guests into a state of focused calm. Tea of a thick consistency

(called “*koi-cha*”) is prepared in silence .The carefully prepared drink is passed around as each guest, in turn, takes a sip. The sharing of a single bowl is symbolic and serves to increase the sense of unity at the gathering. After the *koi-cha* is served, the host then adds more charcoal to the fire, serves dry Japanese sweets, and prepares tea of a thinner, frothier consistency known as “*usu-cha*.” During this final phase the atmosphere lightens and guests engage in casual conversation. However, talk is still focused on appreciation of utensils and the mood.

It is the main guest’s duty to act as a representative of all those present and ask questions about each of the utensils and decorations chosen for the gathering and to work in unison with the host to ensure that the gathering proceeds perfectly, with nothing to distract the guests from their inspiration.

Receiving and Drinking Tea

There are certain rules to be followed when receiving tea at a tea ceremony. Known as *tatema*e or *temae*, they all basically involve showing gratitude to the host. The drinking of the thick tea and thin tea require different procedures, but in both instances, the tea is served with the front of the bowl (i.e. the place where the pattern or glaze is most beautiful,

which is considered to be the best part of the bowl) facing the guest. The guest appreciates the beauty of bowl and tries not to dirty this part of the bowl when drinking.

When serving the *koi-cha*, guests all drink from the same bowl being passed around. First, when you receive a bowl of tea, place it between yourself and the next guest, and then bow to the host. Pick the bowl up with the right hand, place it on the palm of the left hand, and raise it slightly with a bow of the head to show thanks. In order to avoid drinking from the front of the bowl (so that the front is away from the lips) turn the bowl towards yourself twice, and sip a small amount. When you have finished drinking, place it on the *tatami* mat in front of you, take out a paper towel from the breast of your kimono and wipe the place where your lips touched the bowl before putting the towel back into the kimono. Pick up the bowl in the right hand, rest it on the left palm and turn the front of the bowl to its original position before passing it to the next guest. After passing the bowl to the next guest, bow again.

The *usu-cha* is prepared for each person individually. As with the thick tea, when you receive the bowl of tea, place it between you and the next guest and bow to excuse yourself for going first. Then put it in front of your knees and thank the host for the tea. Turn the bowl toward yourself twice so that you won’t drink from the front part. When you have finished drinking all of it, then wipe the place you drank from with your fingers. Turn the front of the bowl back to face you. Put the bowl down on the *tatami* in front of you and, with your elbows above your knees, pick up the bowl and admire it. When returning the bowl, ensure that the front is turned back to face the host.

The guest carries a packet of folded papers on which sweets should be placed before eating. A special cake pick is used to cut and eat moist sweets, but dry sweets are eaten with the fingers.



Tea utensils
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)