



# Buddhism and the Tea Ceremony

Buddhism in Every Step (C9)  
(英文版)

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# **Buddhism and the Tea Ceremony**

China is known as the “Motherland of Tea” and is the likely origin of the tea plant. Tea is central to the daily life of Chinese people; there is even an old Chinese saying that, “There are seven essential items to start your day: firewood, rice, cooking oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea.” This is just one small way that we see tea closely intertwined with people’s lives.

Drinking tea aids with digestion, enlivens the spirit, and keeps the mind alert. While tea is popular with everyone today, Buddhist monasteries were the first to develop and promote the virtues of tea drinking. Generally, monks and nuns serve tea while hosting lay followers and distinguished guests. This custom began to influence the wider society’s view on tea. Gradually, welcoming guests

by offering tea in homes, in offices, or in restaurants became a common custom. Many people developed the daily habit of drinking a cup of tea after each meal. As Buddhist monasteries expanded their cultivation of tea, some became known for the fine teas that grew there. Many of the teas that are now known throughout the world were first planted and cared for by monastics. As we can see, Buddhism and tea are very closely related. It is nearly impossible to separate the history and development of the two.

## **I. Tea in the Daily Life of a Monastery**

There is a Chinese legend concerning the origin of tea. When Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of the Chan School, was living at Shaolin Monastery on Mount Song, he spent nine years facing a wall in meditation. One day he was feeling particularly drowsy during his meditation and nodded off. When he awoke he was incensed at himself. To ensure that it would not happen again, he cut out his eyelids and threw them to the ground. Where his eyelids fell, the first tea plant sprouted. Since then, whenever the disciples of Bodhidharma would become tired



*Bodhidharma, first Chinese Chan Patriarch*



*Pu-Erh Cake Tea*

during meditation, they would pluck some leaves from the tea plant to brew into a beverage. The drink seemed to enliven the spirit and keep the mind alert. Although this is only a legend, it underlies the close relationship between tea and daily efforts of monks working toward enlightenment.

Tea is prized for its ability to enliven the spirit and keep the mind alert. Monastics are busy every day. There are countless chores to work on from before dawn until well after dusk. Even during contemplative periods, with long hours of sitting meditation, tea is very helpful. Tea became the ideal beverage to refresh the mind and to hydrate the body. Thus, tea has long been used to keep monastics awake and focused during the long hours of deep meditation.

The “Arts” chapter of the *Book of Jin* records how the Venerable Daokai, who practiced sitting meditation in Zhaode Temple during the late Zhao dynasty, took only a few herbal pills and drank one or two liters of tea concentrate every day. The concentrate was a compressed cake of tea, ginger, cinnamon, orange peel, and dates. Eventually, he could live without sleeping and was immune to heat and cold.

The Chan School of Buddhism became prevalent after the Tang and Song dynasties. Since Chan masters held tea drinking in high regard, the custom spread rapidly throughout China. Chapter six of the *Record of Feng Shi* says, “During the Kaiyuan era (713-741), at Lingyan Temple of Mount Tai there was a great teacher who promoted the Chan School of Buddhism. The Chan master practiced meditation for many days without food or sleep, sustaining himself on tea alone. Wherever he went, he would make tea. Henceforth, many laypersons emulated him. And so tea became a favorite beverage in society. The habit of tea drinking spread rapidly. Gradually, drinking tea became a custom.”

Once tea gained popularity, it became officially included in monastic tradition and customs. Monasteries had a special “tea room” that was not only used for Chan monks to discuss the Dharma, but also became a place to welcome the lay followers and distinguished guests. In addition, a “tea drum” was installed in the northwest corner of every temple’s Dharma Hall. The drum was sounded to summon the Chan monks to have tea. A “tea chief” or “tea leader” was responsible for boiling the water, making the tea, and serving the tea. Finally, the

“tea-serving monk” served tea and welcomed devotees and visitors at the main entrance of the temple.

Often, the tea is named after the temple it is served in, such as the “Fo Guang Tea” served at Fo Guang Shan. There are also a number of special teas that are served for particular purposes. “Dian Tea” is offered before the altars of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and patriarchs.<sup>1</sup> “Jiela Tea” is a special tea served during monastic gatherings and is offered in the order of ordination seniority. “Pu Tea” is the name of tea served when all the monastics come together to drink tea.

Typically, monastics rise before dawn. After they prepare for their day, they drink tea and attend morning chanting. After each meal, the monastics drink a cup of tea before attending to their affairs. In fascicle twenty-six of the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, Venerable Daoyuan outlines the daily routine of monastics: “Monastics usually rise in the morning. Right after cleaning up, they drink tea. They then pay homage to the Buddha. Before beginning their routine chores or special projects, they pay respect to the abbot at the Dharma Hall.

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1. Dian (奠) also refers to libation offered to the deceased out of respect.

After the noon meal, they take a nap. When they awoken from their nap, they refresh themselves by drinking more tea before going to work on projects that contribute to the temple's viability and its function as a center for preserving and passing on the Dharma." The *Compendium of the Five Lamp Records [of the Chan School]* records that: "Drinking three cups of tea after each meal was customary for Chan monastics." From this, we can see that drinking tea was an important aspect in a monastic's daily routine, a tradition that remains popular to this day.

## II. Tea and Chan are One

Zheng Banqiao wrote the following couplet during the Qing dynasty:

Since the beginning,  
scholars can assess any water,  
Through the ages,  
Chan masters loved tea-tasting contests.

Chan masters do not simply drink tea, they use their tea time to speak of Chan and debate in an

effort to awaken to the Way. This can be seen in the famous *gongan* “Zhaozhou’s Drinking Tea.”

When students came to Chan Master Zhaozhou asking him questions, he would usually provide simple answers such as, “go drink some tea,” “wash the dishes,” or “sweep the floor.” For example, if someone were to ask, “Master, what is the Way?” Chan Master Zhaozhou would answer, “You, go drink tea.” If someone were to ask again, “Master, how can I be awakened?” he would just shout, “Drink tea! Go!”

What is the Way? What is awakening? They are the same as drinking tea. The mind may tell you it is something different, but one should not depart from everyday life. It is within everyday life that one finds the Way.

The Sixth Patriarch says in the *Platform Sutra*, “The Dharma is within the world, apart from this world there is no awakening.” We approach Chan through our daily life with internal peace of mind and reflect on our true nature. We can attain peace of mind or a spiritual awakening through the most ordinary activities, such as drinking tea, eating, and putting on clothes. If we separate meditation from life, we lose touch with reality. That is why Chan

Master Zhaozhou taught us that we cannot depart from the world, because if we were to separate ourselves from our everyday lives we would be incapable of realizing the Way.

The *gongan* “Zhaozhou’s Drinking Tea” heavily influenced Japanese monks, who carried the practice of tea drinking back to Japan. Japanese Chan Master Murata Shuko, the first tea master and creator of the tea ceremony, was once a disciple of Chan Master Ikkyu. He was constantly falling asleep during daytime meditation, so he sought a doctor’s advice. The doctor advised that he drink tea. Chan Master Murata Shuko grew so fond of tea that he would serve tea to others with great ceremony. Although Japanese scholars still debate as to whether a secular tea ceremony predated this occurrence, Chan Master Murata Shuko is credited as the founder of *chado* (茶道), “the Way of tea” or “tea ceremony,” and is referred to in Japan as the “forefather of the art of tea.” In Master Shuko’s time, tea became so popular that it was enjoyed by commoners and nobles alike.

After Murata Shuko created the tea ceremony, Master Ikkyu asked him, “What is your mind like when drinking tea?”

Master Shuko answered, "I drink tea for health."

Master Ikkyu wasn't satisfied with his answer. He asked again, "What are your thoughts on 'Zhaozhou's drinking tea?'"

Master Shuko remained silent.

Master Ikkyu ordered an attendant to serve Shuko a cup of tea. As Shuko held the cup in his hands, Ikkyu shouted, and hit the teacup, shattering it. Shuko remained unmoved by Chan Master Ikkyu's strange behavior. Shuko bowed, paid his respects, and said goodbye.

When he reached the door, Master Ikkyu suddenly called his name, shouting, "Shuko!"

He turned his head and answered, "Yes, master. Your disciple is here."

Chan Master Ikkyu then questioned him, "Since the cup is broken do you still have tea to drink?"

Shuko positioned his hands in front of his chest as if he were still holding a cup, made a tea-drinking motion, and said, "Yes, master, I am still drinking my tea."

Master Ikkyu then asked, "Since you are going to leave, how can you still drink a cup of tea?"

Shuko replied sincerely and respectfully, "I am going to drink tea here and there."

Chan Master Ikkyu asked again, “I asked you, ‘what is your mind like when drinking tea?’ You only know about drinking here or drinking there, but claim to have no special feeling. This is drinking tea with no-mind, how can that be so?”

Shuko said calmly, “No-mind’s tea is just as the willow is green and the flowers are red.”

Chan Master Ikkyu was pleased, and then transmitted the Dharma to Shuko. Shuko then went on and completed the new tea ceremony.

When drinking tea, if you can drink in the tea’s peacefulness, its Chan flavor, and enjoy the tea of no-mind, you can experience the incredible state of Chan. No wonder Master Ikkyu was so impressed and accepted Shuko’s tea ceremony. Tea and Chan share the common characteristics of purity and tranquility. Chan is active, visceral, and direct; it is our original face from before we were born. Tea itself is pure and knows the nature of things, and it is in harmony with the spirit of Chan.

If one can drink tea and experience its nonself and non-flavor, that is the highest state of Chan. Tea and Chan share the same taste and essence: tea is pure and crisp, while Chan is tranquil and still.

### III. Spreading Buddhism, Spreading Tea

As Buddhist temples spread, so too did the cultivation of tea plants. By growing tea on their grounds, temples were not only able to satisfy their own need for tea, but the sale of tea allowed monastics to pay for the upkeep of the temple. In time, many teas became well-known based on the monasteries where they were produced.

Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Buddhist temples have been secluded deep in the forests and high in the mountains. As a result, temples tended to be situated in the ideal environments for growing tea. The monastics carefully cultivated the tea plants and harvested the leaves. The methods of processing tea advanced and the tea became highly refined. Certain temples produced many superior, highly refined teas. Their history has given China a reputation for producing many famous and well-loved teas. Putuo Temple, in Zhejiang Province, is famous for their “Buddha Tea” and its excellent flavor. Another famous tea is “Cloud and Mist Tea,” grown in Huading Temple on Mount Tiantai.

Gantong Temple, in Yunnan Province in the city of Dali, is known for its “Gantong Tea.”

Hangzhou's Dharma Mirror Temple is known for "Fragrant Forest Tea," a green tea that has a very elegant aroma. Huiming Temple on Mount Chimu in southern Zhejiang Province is also famous for the tea it produces.

In China, there are six main types of tea. One example, oolong tea, was originally grown in Fujian Province on Mount Wuyi. Tea has grown on Mount Wuyi since the Song dynasty, with the best tea grown by the monastics of Wuyi Temple. The "Water and Moon Tea" is grown by the monastics of the Water and Moon Chan Temple on Mount Dongting. This famous tea also goes by the name "Green Snail Spring Tea," and is known for being a light, aromatic green tea. One of the most treasured Chinese teas is called Da Hongpao, or "Scarlet Robe." It is grown near the Tianxin Cliff of Mount Wuyi in Fujian Province.

The first book on tea, the *Classic of Tea*, was written by Lu Yu during the Tang dynasty. Lu Yu's interest in tea began in his early life, when he brewed it for his foster father, who was a monk. Before Lu Yu (733-804), tea was considered an ordinary drink. But Lu Yu was fascinated by tea. He traveled to countless temples to learn

about growing, harvesting, processing, categorizing, and brewing tea from the Chan monastics. In tea, he saw the harmony and order that exists in all things. His life was intimately connected to tea and Buddhism. Not only did he formulate the *Classic of Tea*, but he taught people how to manufacture tea, to lay out the utensils, and to brew tea properly. Due to his book, he became known as the “god of Chinese tea.” Due to Lu Yu’s efforts, tea became a popular beverage.

During the Song Dynasty, at Yuhang Jingshan Temple in Zhejiang Province, monastics, devotees, and worshippers would gather together for a tea ceremony. During these tea ceremonies, they would have tea tastings. At these events, they evaluated the best quality teas.

As they underwent these tastings, they also changed the process of making tea. Instead of boiling tea, they began to whip it. With this method powdered tea is added to hot water, which is then whipped with a fine bamboo whisk. This method was developed in the Song dynasty. Whipping tea was easier and more convenient than boiling, and brought drinking tea into greater prominence in mainstream society.

Buddhism spread from China to Korea, and with it, tea spread as well. Similarly, around the year 805 the Japanese Monk Saicho went to China to study Buddhism. He had traveled from Japan to Guoqing Temple at Mount Tiantai in Zhejiang Province. When he returned to his homeland, he brought tea seeds back with him. He planted the seeds at Saka Motozon, Loku Daisan Gika Mountain. Five years later, when the plants reached maturity, Abbot Eichu served the green tea to Emperor Saga. The emperor was so impressed with the drink that he instituted tea cultivation in provinces near Kyoto, and tea became a major part of Japanese culture. The Japanese continued to develop the Chinese tea drinking traditions. Tea drinking became a complex, artistic ritual.

Chan Master Shuko, the “forefather of the tea ceremony” mentioned earlier, once went to China to study under the famed Chan master Keqin. Before Shuko returned to Japan, his teacher gave him a book titled *Tea and Chan are One and the Same*. This book remains on exhibit in Nihon Nusa Daitokuji Temple to this day. Shuko continued to practice and develop Chan Buddhism and the art of tea on his own, creating the Japanese Tea Ceremony.



*Whisk for mixing powdered tea*

Even today, the tea ceremony is highly regarded in Japan. The rules around the tea ceremony affected Japanese literature, the arts, philosophy, calligraphy, flower arrangement, interior design, garden architecture, food preparation, and ritual greetings. Due to the relationship between tea and Buddhism, this helped facilitate the spread of Buddhism in Japan. In this way, tea became a tool to help spread the Chan School of Buddhism.

Since long ago, Buddhist monastics have planted famous leaves, made excellent tea, and have presented the fruits of their labor to devotees. Much of today's tourism centers on tea customs. Tourists can share in Chinese culture as they consume tea. Tea brings warmth and relaxation to the drinker. Today, we can appreciate the richness of tea, the fruits of generations of labor, love and tradition by our forbearers. Now, while you are enjoying a cup of tea, you can put your troubles behind you. Find a place to relax with your friends, a place where you can share your personal and professional troubles as you enjoy your drink. The place where tea is served is a place of peace and harmony. Tea brings with it a special tranquility, purifying one's heart and bringing it closer to the Chan mind. Tea is one of our greatest companions in life.

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