

OMOTENASHI: FINDING THE CENTER OF *CHADO*, THE JAPANESE WAY OF TEA

The Way of Tea is nothing more than boiling water, making tea, and drinking it—

This statement is attributed to Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), the progenitor of the Japanese Way of Tea as it is currently understood, and its philosophical underpinnings have continued to inform the study and practice of *Chado* since the sixteenth century.

To gain some insight into what Rikyu might have been suggesting in his definition, one needs to look more closely at the three actions he references both from the perspective of the person making tea, the host, and from that of the person drinking tea, the guest.

Boiling Water: Although the tea to be served may have been carefully selected and prepared, without water there can be no beverage. Water of the best quality must be used, and guaranteeing that quality is one of the primary concerns of the tea host. In addition, heating the water to its optimum tea-making temperature is equally as critical. If the water is too hot, it will scorch the tea, giving it a bitter taste, and if it is not hot enough, the tea, which is traditionally whisked into a suspension, will not remain in that state for very long, and the guest will be unable to enjoy the bowl of tea fully.

Making Tea: Determining the proportional balance between the amounts of tea and water is essential, and a student of *Chado* may spend years learning to execute this action with accuracy. In the final analysis, however, this important factor may actually be more suggestive than prescribed. Over time, the good host will come to know not only the ‘default’ amount of tea to measure into a bowl but also the individual preferences of more frequently-attending guests, and this combined knowledge will serve to guide how the tea is prepared.

Drinking It: The guest receives the tea prepared by the host with gratitude, addresses the host, directly expressing thanks (*O temae chodai itashimasu.*), and, in drinking it, shares the whole experience with the host who made it. With humility, the host can take comfort in the fact that at that given moment, the best possible bowl of tea has been made for the guest.

But if one wishes to understand the central truth of the Japanese Way of Tea, it is necessary to look beyond definitions and attempt to discover what really motivates these desires to master **boiling water**, to master **making tea**, and **drinking it**. Contextually, what is at its center?

What is at its center is a relational dynamic which is initially established by the host, but which is then shared equally with the guest or guests. That dynamic might be defined as **Omotenashi**. This culturally iconic word can be translated as ‘Hospitality’. But it is Hospitality with a capital H. In the West, hospitality tends to be viewed more like a cordial extension of amenities to a visitor than anything expressing something deeper, something more profound.

In *Chado*, from the outset of planning a tea gathering, the host needs to focus mind and heart almost exclusively on the guest or guests who will later experience this focus in real time and who will even shift the focus back onto the host as the gathering progresses, a truly shared interaction. Well in advance of a planned tea event, such factors as these will be of concern to the prospective host:

The Theme of the Gathering. Determining the reason for presenting a tea gathering comes first. What will the gathering celebrate or honor? Will it be related to the seasons, i.e., cherry blossoms in the spring or the full moon of autumn? Will it celebrate the opening of the sunken hearth or the first tea of the new year? Or will the theme be something more personal? A birthday or anniversary? Whatever the decision, it must be clear and inform everything that follows.

The Choice of Tea to be Served. Powdered green tea (*matcha*) is the tea that is associated with Chado. Since most commercial matcha is a blend of tea leaves harvested from several terroirs, taste profiles will vary. Choosing the tea which best relates to the theme of the event will reflect the season of the year in which the gathering will occur. If it is summer, the host might select a lighter blend of tea, something a bit more herbal perhaps, something the guest might find refreshing, even cooling. If it is a colder season, the selected blend might be more robust and warming, taking the guest's mind off the cold weather outside. If food is to be served, the host will want to consider a tea that will be complementary, something the guest might experience as a natural extension of the meal.

The Choice of Confection. Again, seasonality will play a large part in the decision the host makes regarding the main confection to be served. This sweet—in color, configuration, and ingredients—will be suggestive to the guest, perhaps even eliciting a smile of recognition. Couple seasonality with the over arching theme of the gathering, and the guest's experience will be even more satisfying. These two elements, season and theme, will also impact the choice of the auxiliary confections which will be served near the end of the gathering. Though not as individualized, these sweets will still be reflective of the moment and complete for the guest this portion of the circle of **Omotenashi**.

The Selection and Arrangement of Utensils (*Toriawase*). The utensils used in the presentation will have been as carefully selected as the tea and confections. The host, again considering the guest, season, and theme, will choose items which taken together will create a unified, harmonious whole. The host will provide the guest with a full experience, allowing as many of the senses as possible to be involved actively in the appreciation of the display. Questions about the various items being used will be asked by the guest, and information will be shared by the host. If the provenance of any of the items is relevant to the presentation, so much the better. However, provenance alone should never be the determining factor in selecting or rejecting a utensil. Such interactions between host and guest thus become mutually pleasurable.

The General Comfort of the Guest. In the end, the choice of tea and confections and the selection and arrangement of utensils will mean nothing if the guest is physically uncomfortable. To insure the guest's comfort, the host will need to consider such details as the temperature of the tea room and whether the guest might require a sitting aid of some kind. Recognizing that water will be heating in a cast iron kettle which radiates warmth, the host will regulate the room's temperature accordingly. The somewhat hard and unyielding surface of the tatami mats on which the guest will sit can be punishing to the legs. The thoughtful host will have cushions or other types of sitting aids available, and the guest will be encouraged to use them.

At this point, it is important to remember that the host does not engage in all this planning just to impress the guest or to show off acquired knowledge. Rather, the host's concerns are honestly directed outwardly toward the guest.

Further, long before all this preplanning for the presentation of a specific tea gathering has come into focus, a host-to-be will have undertaken other and even more detailed preparations. These are related to the processes and procedures directly involved in the making of tea.

Likely, the prospective host, a student of *Chado*, has spent years learning and practicing how to fold and refold the *fukusa*, the silk utensil-purifying cloth, learning and practicing how to hold, position, re-hold, and re-position utensils in the tea making space, learning and practicing how and when to ask and answer questions directly related to the procedure, engaging with the guest, who is likely a student of *Chado* as well and who has gone through much the same kind of training, in a dialogue. More broadly, other traditional Japanese art forms related to the practice of tea (iron, wood, ceramics, bamboo, fabrics, and even cuisine) will also have been studied.

And the list could go on.

An outsider might ask, "Why does the student of *Chado*, the potential host or guest, engage so intensively in this study and practice?" Quite simply, they do it to forget it all. They do it to free the heart and mind, to give themselves permission to be fully present, to be totally in the moment, and to mutually share that moment, the host and guest together.

Omotenashi is selfless. Whatever the actions are that the host engages in, no matter how small or insignificant they may appear to be, they are not 'about' that host. Raku Kichizaemon, the 15th generation head of the Raku family of ceramic artists has said, "Tea is a form of art that nurtures an ever-expanding circle of human interaction as opposed to thrusting one's own ego into people's faces." That is a powerful statement, a clear expression of the dynamic in play. The focus is on the guest, and the host does what they do with no expectation of return, i.e., no return on their personal investment. Get thee behind me, EGO! And, of course, where there is no expectation, there can be no disappointment. A flicker of light in the guest's eye or a smile is enough. A balance is struck. Equilibrium exists.

Sometimes, a scroll bearing the kanji characters 無事 (*Buji*) will be hung in the alcove of the tea room. *Buji* can be translated in various ways. In the tea room, it is often interpreted as meaning *No Agenda*. These characters become a presiding metaphor for the tea experience, a metaphor which has significant implications both for the host and for the guest. If there is indeed no agenda being followed, other than boiling water, making tea, and drinking it, then every moment spent in the tea room follows directly and honestly upon the previous one. The host and guest walk the same path as if they have never done so before.

The dialogues between the host and principal guest and even among the guests, if there are several, are not perfunctory. The questions and answers, although they have been learned and practiced repeatedly, must be asked from the heart every time as if for the first time. Host and guest respond to real questions with real answers, not just with empty, default words. When, in a *koicha* (thick tea) presentation, for example, the host asks if the tea is to the guest's liking (*Ofuku kagen wa*

ikaga desuka?), a sincere expression of concern, and the guest replies that it is, the host will bow in thankful humility. Mission accomplished. But what if the tea is not to the guest's liking? Is that fact communicated to the host by the answer the guest gives? Probably not. But what happens if a nonverbal message is communicated? Learning to read nonverbal cues is important, and if the host can read these cues correctly, a couple of options immediately open for consideration. The host may simply apologize for the present inadequacy or be prepared to make another bowl tea if necessary.

However, if the host has put all their accumulated knowledge fully into play and has executed their responsibility from the heart, then this 'what if' situation should never arise. The confection **will be** a perfect complement to the tea which **will be** very good-tasting. And the bowl which contains the tea, and which is conveyed from the host's hand to the hand of the guest, will create a quality of human warmth that will continue to resonate in the guest's heart even after the bowl has been returned to the host. This is **Omotenashi**, the balanced dynamic, in action.

Taian, a teahouse located at Myokian temple in Kyoto, the design of which is attributed to Rikyu himself, is considered the ultimate embodiment of the tea sensibility, of **Omotenashi**. It is a tiny space consisting of just two tatami mats and a *tokonoma* or alcove. When the host and guest sit across from each other in this intimate space, they are so close that they can literally feel each other's breath. Passing around a tea bowl in that setting is like passing the host's feelings hand to hand with the guest, and then those feelings find ultimate embodiment in the sip of tea that follows. The presence of the physical bowl may even be forgotten as the symbiotic energy contained in the hands of the host and guest is experienced, perhaps facilitating, if only philosophically, an entry into a world where peace and harmony are spread through the shared tea moment.

The relational dynamic is complete.

Perhaps these examples are too idealized, too specialized, or even unattainable. But then again, perhaps they are not. Rather, they serve to illustrate the **Omotenashi** objective all tea practitioners should be striving to attain whether in a tea 'lesson' situation or in a tea 'gathering' experience. Every student of Chado must recognize first that a tea 'lesson' is in fact a lesson, a practice, a procedure set within a philosophical framework. There is a student, and there is a teacher. The details of a lesson are repeated until a basically cognitive exercise is superseded by automatic muscle memory. A lesson is neither a competition between students nor a performance begging acknowledgment of some kind. However, there does need to be a takeaway. Something is to be learned. Maybe that 'something' is a physical thing, but maybe it is not. Therefore, in this example, it becomes the teacher's responsibility to guide the student in the direction of discovery.

One can understand the 'physical' in a lesson situation relatively easily, e.g., how to hold the tea scoop when placing the lid of the tea container on the tatami mat. A teacher can direct the 'how' of learning this action. But it is the 'not physical' that may relate more directly, more conceptually, to **Omotenashi**.

Question: Was I fully present? Or was I only trying to remember what procedural step came next?

Question: Did I really strive to make the best bowl of tea I could? Or was I just measuring x-number of scoops of tea into a bowl, adding the requisite amount of water, whisking, serving, and hoping for the best?

Question: Was I really reaching out to my guest, hoping for a shared moment in time? Or was I just so aware of the discomfort in my legs and feet that I only wanted everything to be over?

Finding the answers to these questions may not be easy, but they are vitally important and must be sought, and, unfortunately, in this instance, a teacher may be unable to assist the student.

On the other hand, a tea ‘gathering’ experience is not a lesson *per se*. Put into an academic context, it is more like a test or an examination but with these differences: there will be no failing grade; there will be no consequences. And, certainly, there will be no ‘outside’ help. Equilibrium will be maintained but on a different plane, a higher plane. The host’s humanity, a deep concern for another human being, the guest, will maintain its primacy, its pride of place. And the guest in turn not only will welcome this concern but also will humbly accept it. But here, unlike in the ‘lesson’ situation, in this ‘real-world’ experience, everything will unfold without the guiding hand of a teacher.

Both host and guest need to consider these three directives: Stop Thinking; Be There in the Moment; Unfetter Your Heart. All the details will remain, ready for you to review tomorrow. Right now: **SHARE**.

That is the true center of the Japanese Way of Tea. That is **Omotenashi** raised to its highest level.

The Way of Tea is nothing more than boiling water, making tea, and drinking it.

Sen no Rikyu’s definition, along with the words **Harmony**, **Respect**, **Purity**, and **Tranquility** are very good guideposts to place along the path of a tea student’s journey to becoming a host or guest. What they will teach is more than just another skill set. What will be discovered under their surface is transformative. **Omotenashi!**

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December 2017