

CHAPTER FIVE

The Book of Tea and Japanese Religion

It is in the Japanese tea ceremony that we see the culmination of tea ideals...Tea with us became more than an idealization of the form of drinking; it is a religion of the art of life. The beverage grew to be an excuse for the worship of purity and refinement, a sacred function at which the host and guest joined to produce for that occasion the utmost beatitude of the mundane. The tearoom was an oasis in the dreary waste of existence where weary travellers could meet to drink from the common spring of art-appreciation...A subtle philosophy lay behind it all. Teaism was Taoism in disguise. (Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea*)

Oriental people see the littleness of greatness whereas occidentals focus on the greatness of littleness.
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So, writes Okakura concerning the relationship between a cup of tea and the Japanese religion, Zen Buddhism. But to occidentals, Buddhism or, thanks to popularizations, such as *The Way of Zen* (introduced by an occidental named Alan W. Watts) are well known. Indeed, Watts is a person whom occidentals identify with Japanese religion while Okakura, a Japanese, remains unknown to most. Whatever the value and/or scholarship of occidental Alan Watts, he is not a Japanese. Indeed, *The Way of Zen* -- which I castigate as a “secondary” work -- makes no mention of *The Book of Tea*, although Watts makes two references to Zen and tea, one on page 86 and assorted references to tea and gardening within pages 190 to 194 in his 201 page popularization of Zen - though Okakura’s work is cited within the Bibliography on page 207. But enough of the occidental view of tea and Zen; we move to a study of the basic text itself fashioned by Kakuzo Okakura.

Occidentals, particularly Americans are more judgmental than they are observant so Okakura is so perceptive when he says:

Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in others. The average westerner, in his sleek complacency, will see in the tea ceremony but another instance of the thousand-and-one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him.(p.2)

A case in point is the manner intellectual occidentals such as Watts grammatically describe being human. To characterize human beings as thinking beings is to categorize and, therefore, to lose what it means to be human. So also, to characterize humans as *rational animals* is to lose the fullness of being human. Grammatically speaking *rational animal* is used as a collective **noun**, but *animal* is a **noun** being modified by an **adjective**, *rational*. English grammar calls *animal* a **noun** and *rational* an **adjective** and anyone with the least knowledge of grammar realizes that a **noun** is more important than an **adjective**, even though it is altered by the adjectival modifier. Occidentals, however, place all the emphasis upon the **adjective**, *rational* while ignoring the **noun** *animal*.

That occidental creation, the American Constitution provides the classic case in point, as described by Lederer within his 1989 edition of *The Colonial American Dictionary*. Lederer points out that the meaning of “man”, as in “all men are created equal...” was “white, anglo saxon protestant male” which, he adds was what Protestant Anglos identified with *human*. Thus, the “hope” many have and do read into that statement is misplaced since the frustration resulting from that meaning took two hundred years to work through. Women, for instance, did not even receive the right to vote until 1930, and did not even qualify to receive AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children -- or is it, Aid for Farmers with Dependent Crops, as the biggest government subsidy?) until October 1, 1972 - since prior to that date only the “male headed family” qualified as an eligible recipient!

Human reason relates to being human as a parasite does to a host.

If, however, we occidentals paid more attention to English grammar, we might take *being animal* more seriously. Then, plants and animals might receive more respect within our biosphere and we, as the only rational animal parasite on earth might have more respect for our host planet. *Parasite* is a Greek word *sitos*, meaning *eating* with a prefix, *para*, meaning *along side of*, so a parasite is literally one who eats at the table of another, presumably a *host*. If such were the case, then we might be more sensitive to the fact that our survival hangs upon our respect for our host - which in practical fact means that the survival of rationality hangs upon our respect for the animal-vegetative body, rationality's host! Words and word meanings are two of those great little things about which Okakura speaks but occidentals do not understand because they concentrate upon the greatness of little things, such as being rational! Okakura needs no such linguistic and grammatical instruction to what it means to be a human being.

The Book of Tea is nothing more or less than Okakura describing the “...greatness of little things...” These little things begin with vegetative life, a plant, a tea plant; yet, even with something smaller since this little tea plant has leaves littler than the plant. So, Okakura, as does the Taoist as well as the Zen Buddhist begins only with a leaf, a tea leaf from that tea plant. The tea leaf mixes with water then becomes tea being poured into a cup as a beverage, so he calls the first section of *The Book of Tea*, “The Cup of Humanity”.

But, yet another littleness becomes great here, the littleness of *being empty*. The littleness of being an empty cup permits the bigness of *being full*, so inevitably Okakura describes the *yin* of *being empty* with the *yang* of *being full* in its relationship to being who we are and to being social, being alive and to dying, to human life and death. Just as the cup’s *being empty* is the key to *being filled with tea*, so a human’s virtue of *being empty* is the key to union with *Tao*.

To keep the proportion of things and give place to others without losing one’s own position was the secret of success in the mundane drama. We must know the whole play in order to act properly our parts; the conception of totality must never be lost in that of the individual. This Lao-tze illustrates by his favorite metaphor of the vacuum...The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves. The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. (p. 11)

So, implies Okakura, just as the reality of a cup is found in being filled with tea, so also is the *fullness of being alive* found in the *emptiness of dying* and the reality of being human as being filled with *Tao*. An occidental, Dr. Viktor Frankl, contemporary psychiatrist and author of *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959) also developed a parallel to Okakura’s insight, Frankl’s *logotherapy*, literally, *meaning healing* out of the awareness of being naked and empty as he reflected upon his experiences within Auschwitz and then Dachau:

While we were waiting for the shower, our nakedness was brought home to us: we really had nothing now except our bare bodies - even minus hair; all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence. What else remained for us as a material link with our former lives? For me there were my glasses and my belt; the latter I had to exchange later on for a piece of bread. (pp.22-3)

This daily awareness of nakedness generated a common thought:

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions which will be mentioned later, I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not 'run into the wire'. This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide - touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. (p. 27)

Those "personal convictions..." were

generated from love, love

of self and others, primarily from being loved and so being part of a purposeful plan or whole. (Pp.58-9) Such love Frankl found within the *Old Testament* and he quotes: "Set me like a seal upon your heart, love is as strong as death".

The essence of love is to value the distinction of being a filled emptiness, that is, being beloved and, therefore, capable of loving.

The intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence...As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before...In the last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose. (pp.61-4)

We understand therefore, Okakura's first statement within *The Book of Tea*: "Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage". Tea healed human ailments and grew into a pleasurable participation of the meaningfulness of life itself. But, Okakura then comments:

The fifteenth century saw Japan ennoble it into a religion of asceticism - teaism. Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect, as it is a

tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.

Humans need to reflect on being an animal in order to understand what it means to be rational.

Again, the oriental openness to and imitation of nature asserts itself. The vegetative world becomes a model as *Tao* summons the human being to imitate nature and re-acquire the order which rationality loses contact with as a result of the conceptual order it constructs and becomes comfortable with merely as a result of habit. Now, Okakura talks about “The Schools of Tea”, then compares “Taoism and Zennism”, and describes “The Tearoom”, finally, discusses the “Tea Masters”.

“The Tearoom” is the focus of *The Book of Tea* just as the body we live within should be the focus of the rational animal. Were we to use our so-called “common” sense, we would reflect upon our human body in order to understand our being rational animals. Or, to be more direct, we would reflect upon us as animal, in order to understand what it means to be rational. Comparisons presume that we understand, when in fact our comparisons frequently only project prejudice. So, what does it mean to be a rational animal? Well, the most obvious answer is that it means to live within a body, so how we live physically will affect how we think - of course, this is a two, not a one way street; each influences the other, but the balance which is healthy happiness can not be found through the knowledge of rationality alone. Health of body, therefore, is more important than knowledge of nuclear physics! This is why we see the Ancient Greeks including physical activities, such as wrestling, dancing, music and ballet in learning about mathematics, astronomy, rhetoric, philosophy and other “academic” subjects. The Romans, following the Greeks, coined the idiom: mens *sana in corpore sano* - a healthy mind lives in a healthy body.

“The Tearoom” models

The Book of Tea is the application of Okakura’s perception of the “greatness of little things”.

itself, therefore, upon the world of nature as the expression of and path to *Tao*.

The simplicity and purism of the tearoom resulted from emulation of the Zen monastery. A Zen monastery differs from those of other Buddhist sects inasmuch as it is meant only to be a dwelling place for the monks. Its chapel is not a place of worship or pilgrimage, but a college room where the students congregate for discussion and the practice of meditation. The room is bare except for a central alcove in which, behind the altar, is a statute of Bodhidharma, the founder of

the sect, or of Shakyamuni attended by Kashyapa and Ananda, the two earliest Zen patriarchs. On the altar, flowers and incense are offered up in memory of the great contributions which these sages made to Zen. We have already said that it was the ritual instituted by the Zen monks of successively drinking tea out of a bowl before the image of Bodhidharma, which laid the foundations of the tea ceremony. (p.15)

Okakura then compares “...the ways of our tea and flower masters ...” and “...the religious veneration with which they regard flowers”;

The harder humans try, the worse they fail, if they disregard what is natural or refuse to work with nature.

They do not cull at random, but carefully select each branch of spray with an eye to the artistic composition they have in mind. They would be ashamed should they chance to cut more than were absolutely necessary. It may be remarked in this connection that they always associate the leaves, if there be any, with the flower, for their object is to present the whole beauty of plant life...

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When a tea master has arranged a flower to his satisfaction, he will place it on the tokonoma, the place of honor in a Japanese room. Nothing else will be placed near it which might interfere with its effect, not even a painting, unless there be some special aesthetic reason for the combination. It rests there like an enthroned prince, and the guests or disciples on entering the room will salute it with a profound bow before making their addresses to the host. (p.25)

So, we see that Okakura’s initial comment in “Taoism and Zennism”, namely, “We have already remarked that the tea ceremony was a development of the Zen ritual” (p.9) has come full circle.

Occidentals miss the greatness of littleness because they focus on more rather than less: a dozen rather than one rose.

Chinese historians have always spoken of Taoism as the “art of being in the world”, for it deals with the present - ourselves. It is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow. The present is the moving infinity, the legitimate sphere of the relative. Relativity seeks adjustment; adjustment is art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings. Taoism accepts

the mundane as it is and, unlike the Confucians and the Buddhists, tries to find beauty in our world of woe and worry...Shakyamuni, Confucius and Lao-tzu once stood before a jar of vinegar - the emblem of life - and each dipped in his finger to taste the brew. The matter-of-fact Confucius found it sour, the Buddha called it bitter and Lao-tzu pronounced it sweet.
(p. 11)

To be open to nature is to allow nature to be as it is; so, to try to control nature is to fail.

“It is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow...Taoism accepts the mundane as it is and...tries to find beauty in our world of woe and worry”: Okakura here sums up his world view and shows how his view is the culmination of two philosophic views of the human world. The Buddhist tastes the bitterness of the world, yet, this is the job of the human because this world is merely a place wherein nature is a kiri tree and humans are harps. Okakura, however, is more Taoist than Buddhist. Hence, he notes that “People are not taught to be really virtuous, but to behave properly”. He ascribes this to our being “...frightfully self-conscious”.

Occidental thinkers suffer from just such a delusion because being “self-conscious” in this sense means living with an assumption that to be rational means variously to be perfect, civilized, chosen vis á vis nature, pagans, the damned! Okakura also observes...we take refuge in pride because we are afraid to tell the truth to ourselves...(so) ...the spirit of barter is everywhere...One can even buy a so-called religion, which is really but common morality sanctified with flowers and music”. (p. 11) Humans must drink tea, build a tea-room, drink tea in the tea-room and imitate nature in such a manner that they taste the sweet presence of Tao in the vinegar of life they are given to taste.

Okakura’s meaning for religion lies within his telling of the tale of the Taming of the Harp. The lesson is bluntly stated in this sentence: when humans seek to control nature, they will accomplish nothing meaningful and frustrate union with the first principle through submission to nature. Those who sought to “tame” the harp which the wizard made from the kiri tree failed because “the harp refused to recognize a master”.(pp. 19-20) Indeed, the harder they tried, the worse they failed. We too will fail if we do not return to our nature; if we do not treat ourselves as we are: “It is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow...” So, we must imitate Pai Ya.

At last came Pai Ya, the prince of harpists. With tender hand he caressed the harp as one might seek to soothe an unruly horse, and

softly touched the cords. He sang of nature and the seasons, of high mountains and flowing waters, and all the memories of the tree awoke! Once more the sweet breath of spring played amidst its branches. The young cataracts, as they danced down the ravine, laughed to the budding flowers. Anon were heard the dreamy voices of summer with its myriad insects, the gentle pattering of rain, the wail of the cuckoo. Hark! A tiger roars - the valley answers again. It is autumn; in the desert night, sharp like a sword gleams the moon upon the frosted grass. Now winter reigns, and through the snow-filed air swirl flocks of swans and rattling hailstones beat upon the boughs with fierce delight. (p. 20)

Pai Ya respected the instrument so he sought through his fingers to give the harp a voice to sing. Then, the memory of being a kiri tree awakened as it returned to its natural state: the harp being returned to its un-carved state of non-being and it regained its contact with Tao, so the harp “sang of nature and the seasons...” The echo of Lao-tzu is clear:

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In ancient times, those who practiced *Tao* well did not seek to enlighten the people, but to make them ignorant.

People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge.

Therefore, he who rules the state through knowledge is a robber of the state.

He who rules a state not through knowledge is a blessing to the state.

One who knows these two things also (knows) the standard.

Always to know the standard is called profound and secret virtue.

Virtue becomes deep and far-reaching and with it all things return to their original state.

Then complete harmony will be reached.

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He who knows the male and keeps to the female becomes the ravine of the world. Being the ravine of the world, he will never depart from eternal virtue but returns to the state of infancy.

He who knows the white and yet keeps to the black becomes the model for the world.

Being the model for the world, he will never deviate from the eternal virtue but returns to the state of the non-ultimate.

He who knows glory but keeps to humility becomes the valley of the world.

He will be proficient in eternal virtue and returns to the state of un-carved wood.

When the un-carved wood is broken up, it is turned into concrete things, but, when the wise use it, they become the learning people.

Therefore, the great ruler does not cut up.

Living according to nature means to love what is natural – which is us.

Yet, the lesson of the Taming of the Harp is incomplete. Okakura observes that “...Pai Ya changed the key and sang of love”(p.20) and “the forest swayed like an ardent swain deep lost in thought”. Then Pai Ya “changed” the mood and “sang of war”. Then the “harp arose the tempest of Lung Men. The “Celestial Monarch” addressed Pai Ya and asked “wherein lay the secret of his victory?”

Sire, others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Pai Ya or Pai Ya were the harp. (p. 20)

How we live telegraphs how we die, so if we do not live according to nature, we shall not die according to nature.

So, humans must play themselves like Pai Ya played the harp. They, like the kiri tree, have an

eternal source since “it is in us that God meets with nature...”; so we are “...a veritable king...” of the world wherein “... yesterday parts from tomorrow...” If nature is the kiri tree, each of us is a harp so each of us must learn from Pai Ya, “the prince of harpists”. Each has a “... stubborn spirit (which) should be tamed but by the greatest of musicians...” We must use our tender hands and caress our harp “...as one might seek to soothe an unruly horse...” and softly touch the cords. We must sing of nature and the seasons, of high mountains and flowing waters. This return to nature will evoke all the memories within us of our “tree”:

Once more the sweet breath of spring played amidst its branches. The young cataracts, as they danced down the ravine, laughed to the budding flowers. Anon were heard the dreamy voices of summer with its myriad insects, the gentle pattering of rain, the wail of the cuckoo. Hark! A tiger roars - the valley answers again. It is autumn; in the desert night, sharp like a sword gleams the moon upon the frosted grass. Now winter reigns, and through the snow-filled air swirl flocks of swans and rattling hailstones beat upon the boughs with fierce delight.

Then, we, like Pai Ya, must change “...the key and sing of love”:

The forest swayed like an ardent swain deep lost in thought. On high, like a haughty maiden, swept a cloud bright and fair; but passing, trailed long shadows on the ground, black like despair. Again, the mode was changed; Pai Ya sang of war, of clashing steel and trampling steeds. And in the harp arouse the tempest of Lung Men, the dragon rode the lightning, the thundering avalanche crashed through the hills.

Then our friends, like the Celestial Monarch will ask us: “Wherein lay the secret of our victory” to play our harp?”

...Others have failed because they sang but of themselves. I left the harp to choose its theme and knew not truly whether the harp had been Pai Ya or Pai Ya were the harp.

Okakura himself makes this point, as he says:

The masterpiece is a symphony played upon our finest feelings. True art is Pai Ya and we the harp of Lung Men. At the magic touch of the beautiful, the secret chords of our being are awakened; we vibrate and thrill in response to its call. Mind speaks to mind. We listen to the unspoken; we gaze upon the unseen. The master calls forth notes we know not of. Memories long forgotten all come back to us with a new significance. Hopes stifled by fear, yearnings that we dare not recognize, stand forth in new glory. Our mind is the canvas upon which the artists lay their color; their pigments are our emotions; their chiaroscuro the light of joy, the shadow of sadness. The masterpiece is of ourselves, as we are of the masterpiece.

Of course, the ultimate lesson of *The Book of Tea* finds expression within the section on the “Tea Masters”. It is the lesson of death as a natural end for living according to nature.

Great as has been the influence of the tea masters in the field of art, it is as nothing compared to that which they have exerted on the conduct of life...

He only who has lived with the beautiful can die beautifully. The last moments of the great tea masters were as full of exquisite refinement as had been their lives. Seeking always to be in harmony

with the great rhythm of the universe, they were prepared to enter the unknown.(p. 29)

Echoes of Plato's *Apology* ring through these last pages of *The Book of Tea*. Just as Socrates, condemned by his Athenian peers was sentenced to drink hemlock, so Rikiu was condemned to die by the Emperor Hideyoshi. Both achieve union with "Truth" by whatever name through the practice of the virtue of honesty as people living according to nature. But, in neither case is the significant fact the condemnation to die, rather in both cases how each approached death is the central issue. Socrates peacefully submitted to the law of nature, as expressed by the Athenian Court's decision. Likewise, Rikiu submitted to the law of nature, as expressed by Emperor Hideyoshi and invited his chief disciples to a last tea ceremony. Then, Rikiu "...removes his tea gown and carefully folds it upon the mat...disclosing the immaculate white death robe which it had hitherto concealed". (p. 30) Rikiu peacefully drives the "shinning blade of the fatal dagger" home, embracing death as virtuously as he embraced life.