

Psychological Aspects of the Way of Tea

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The Japanese “way of tea” (chado) has historical roots from the twelfth century and has been practiced by millions in essentially the same form since the sixteenth century, yet its many psychological aspects have received scant analysis. A 400-year-old practice, to which there seems nothing truly similar in all the world, yet which has now captivated followers in at least 23 other countries, seems worthy of examination from a psychological perspective.

This article provides a cursory overview of possible motivations for entering the way of tea, its four major psychospiritual principles, several of its aesthetic values, the training process, the experience itself, and its alleged benefits. Because of the very syncretic and holistic nature of the way of tea, the use of the perspectives of transpersonal psychology and health psychology seem most appropriate although behavioral, cognitive, and humanistic-existential psychology will also be applied.

What is it that brings one to study on ones knees for hours at a time for a lifetime, learning more than 200 different detailed procedures for preparing and serving a bowl of tea? Not yet fathoming the answers to this question, I plan further research on it. One might hypothesize that the precision and orderliness of the discipline especially attract obsessive-compulsive personalities. On the other hand, some students seem very disorganized and messy, although they sometimes say the study has helped them to improve in this area. Another hypothesis might be that, although tea people are glad the Meiji government did not classify the way of tea as a “performing art,” perhaps the desire to engage in some kind of artistic endeavor attracts some students in a similar way to performing or creating in other media.

Interviews with many students yield a wide range of answers as to their motivation. Many cite their interest in one or more of the seventeen or so arts involved; some of them are themselves artists and would like to be collectors. Others are interested in Japanese history, literature, religion, and philosophy, and find the way of tea to be an especially holistic,

cross-disciplinary, pleasant and perhaps essential way to gain insight into their field. Many foreign students answer that they were attracted to traditional Japanese culture in general and the way of tea seemed to be the distilled quintessence of it. Japanese students are of course more likely to mention family influence as a major factor in their studying chado, for example, their mother’s having taught it or inheriting tea utensils or a tea-related business like kimono- or sweet-making. Both foreign and Japanese students often say in one way or another that they study tea for psychological and spiritual growth. Occasionally one also mentions stress-reduction and physical health as factors.

Insight into why one might be motivated to choose this discipline over others comes from five related statements of its purpose given by the present Grand Master of the Urasenke lineage of tea. First is to “realize tranquility in relation with others within the environment” (Sen Soshitsu, 1979). In regard to tranquility, it is like a moving meditation, having been compared to T’ai Chi Ch’uan (Cohen, 1976), and thus more appealing to some than sitting still meditation. Secondly, it is usually practiced in relatedness with others rather than in solitude, and, thirdly, in an environmental context of both nature (divine creation) and art (human creation), rather than withdrawing the senses as in some forms of meditation. Fourth, this Grand Master, who has spread chado internationally, also speaks of its purpose in terms of bringing peace to the world through a bowl of tea prepared and received with all the heart, which certainly is another appeal to many. Fifth, he has also said its goal is “to build one’s personality and character” (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1970, p. 6), and the most revered tea master of past history Sen Rikyu is quoted as saying, “The most important purpose of tea...is...to arrive at spiritual enlightenment” (Tanigawa, 1976, p. 37) or, in another translation, “Chanoyu is above all a matter of practicing and realizing the way in accord with the Buddha’s teaching” (Okakura, 1991, pp. 153-154).

The topics of meditation and

enlightenment raise the issues of religion and spirituality, all of which are of importance in transpersonal psychology and health psychology. One often hears that chado is not a religion and even that it has nothing to do with religion, but this is debatable and depends on how one defines religion. Chado's history is intimately bound with Zen Buddhism, and it has also been related (eg., Hirota, 1995) to Shinto purity, Taoist balance of yin and yang, and Confucian propriety, with some even speculating about possible Christian influence on it. Okakura (1991), writing in 1906, said it is a religion of aesthetics. Sen Soshitsu XV (1970) says it is the secularization of Zen and is compatible with all religious faiths.

Anthropologist Jennifer Anderson (1991) applies to tea Gerardot's definition of religion and Zuesse's ideas of "confirmatory" and "transformatory" ritual. Ritual anchors the perceived order in transcendent realms, sometimes only confirming the "fitness" of the person's relation with the "Ultimate" and at other times, symbolically transforming the person, the transcendent order, or both. The latter "serves to regenerate or reiterate parts of the cognitive structure when its integrity is threatened by internal or external change" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Tea developed to touch Order behind Chaos, as experienced in war (especially at the end of the Onin Wars), fires, plagues, and natural disasters like earthquakes, volcano eruptions, typhoons, and tidal waves. Sadler described it in 1933 as combining the benefits of a "Muhammedan" mosque, a cricket field, a Freemason's Lodge, and a Quaker Meeting-house, where all were equal and society's disruptive forces were well-tempered (1992, p. x).

Anderson refers to the four famous principles of tea (wa or "harmony", kei or "respect", sei or "purity", and jaku or "tranquility") as the "major mediators between the transcendent, the cultural system, tea ritual, and the individual" and relates them to Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Buddhism, respectively (Anderson, 1991, p. 213). She sees the first three as confirmatory and the last as transformatory.

Wa embodies the Chinese Taoist concept of harmony between persons and between humans and nature. Suzuki reads its ideograph as yawaragi or "gentleness of spirit" and sees it as integral to Japanese personality and to tea (Suzuki, 1959, pp. 274, 305). The tea host carefully chooses everything for a tea gathering to foster harmony of all its elements: the season, guests, theme, flowers, tea, sweets, and utensils. The Japanese value of sunao or

"sincere, humble compliance" reigns among the participants. Ideally the extreme politeness is not just form but actually expresses and, in a behavioral conditioning sense, even seems to "shape" recognition and respect for the other. The ideal is expressed by the Zen muhinshu, with mu referring to "Nothingness," hin to the "guest," and shu to the "host," thus indicating an empty selflessness, free from desire to impress or compete, and enabling a merging and transcending of individual egos and roles (Sen Soshitsu, 1976, p. 5).

Kei or "respect" may reflect the Confucian ordering of society overlaid on the harmony, although all are equal in the tearoom. It is characterized by sincere reverence, care, and restraint extended to each participant, to the artists represented and their work, and to nature. The oft repeated ichigo ichie or "one time, one meeting" reflects an openness to, in Martin Buber's terms, an I-Thou encounter in the here-and-now moment so stressed by humanistic-existential psychology for healthy relatedness and "becoming." Consistent also with transpersonal psychology and modern physics, such respect recognizes an emptiness, impermanence, constant fluctuation, interpenetration, and oneness behind the apparent separateness and multiplicity of people and things and thus includes an openness to nature and objects as well as to persons. Illustrating such respect for persons and nature, the third generation master Sen Sotan once placed in a vase the stem of a gift camellia, broken in its delivery from a priest by a young acolyte, and put the fallen blossom on the floor beneath (Sen Soshitsu, 1991).

Purity (sei), so valued in Shinto and Japanese culture in general, is both actual and ceremonial purity of the setting and utensils and, most importantly, purity of heart. The latter is reflected in the "mirror position" of the water ladle, which "mirrors" the heart rather than the face, to bring awareness to preparing the tea with a pure heart. Another example is the guests passing through a gate in the freshly sprinkled tea garden, leaving worldly cares outside, and thus, in terms of a Lotus Sutra parable, escaping from the "burning house" of mundane attachments to the "dewy path" or roji of the Pure Land. One also stoops at a low stone basin to rinse mouth and hands, bringing awareness to purity of speech and action before entering the tea room.

The fourth principle jaku or "tranquility" (satori or "enlightenment") is not really a goal for which to strive but a natural result of following the first three principles. Satori is said to inspire a profound personality change with

great wisdom and compassion for all, stemming from the experiential realization of the emptiness/oneness discussed above. Satori may differ in quality and duration, be experienced more than once, and is the beginning rather than the end of spiritual training. Wholeness, health, and holiness accompany it, three words coming from the same root word, are currently being emphasized also in health psychology and transpersonal psychology. Experiencing the four principles in the mundane act of preparing and drinking tea can generalize to all that one does.

In addition to the psychological experiences described above, the aesthetics of chado warrant analysis. Japanese geido or “art-ways” have long used aesthetics as a “path” for psychological and spiritual development. In the Heian leisure of the twelfth century, suki meant “devotion to an art,” such as music or poetry, which cultivated spiritual sensitivity. Kenko’s Essays in Idleness (Keene, 1994) includes activities like the game of go, horseback riding, and archery which also become spiritual paths. In such activities, whole-hearted discipline is said to bring the death of the self and a change in awareness in which ordinary objects and prescribed movements performed without self-consciousness become experienced as “embodiments of the real” (Hiroda, 1995). Aikido, kendo, kohdo (the way of incense), and shodo (the way of calligraphy) are other examples. In tea, light, fragile utensils are handled as if they were sturdy, heavy objects and vice versa, giving rise to an experience of oneness with the utensil, each movement wholly filling the momentary consciousness, yet dissolving into the next, each object complete in its own amazing presence, yet fulfilling its role and moving beyond itself.

Geido can thus lead to the Tendai Buddhist “One Mind” (isshin), an instant of consciousness in which subject is not divided from object and all things are perceived nonhierarchically (Hirota, 1995). One comes to realize the empty nonsubstantiality of all things, the provisional existence of all things, and the simultaneous inconceivableness of things as the nonduality of these two and the simultaneity of movement between them. Free of egocentric perception, one apprehends the vast array of phenomena with wisdom as the One and with compassion as the Many. Rikyu, too, spoke of the compassion for all that arises from entering the tranquility of nothingness and returning to the world to see that everything and everyone, even a tiny blade of grass, share that “glorious nothingness as its basis of being. It is wonderful, wonderful, and yet more wonderful...We cannot help putting both our palms together and bowing

to each other” and everything as well (Kobori, 1988, p. 11). This “no-thingness” or emptiness or void or sunyata (Japanese, ku) is expressed in the Indian speculative inclination by its many sutras and philosophical works, in Chinese daily practicality by the Zen verse, “How wonderfully supernatural and how miraculous this is: I draw water, and I carry fuel”, and in Japanese aesthetics such as chado.

A glimpse into history can help one understand the aesthetics of chado. Although chado began in the twelfth century with the drinking of tea in the simple settings of Zen monasteries, by the fourteenth century it had become a lavish entertainment of samurai and shogun with elaborate banquets in large shoin reception halls for contests of identifying teas and appreciating refined and elegant Chinese art objects. This shoin style of tea was reformed and infused by Juko, Joo, and Sen Rikyu in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with that of the soan (hermit’s thatched hut) style known as wabi tea. They inherited an aesthetic from priest and poet Shinkei of “withered”, “chill”, and “meager”. This recognized the beauty of pathos revealed in ordinary objects of the natural world when attachments to the glittering surface of phenomena and the illusion of self and permanence fall away, duality of subject and object is transcended, and the One in the Many, about which Suzuki wrote, is apprehended (Hirota, 1995). Suzuki defined wabi specifically as “transcendental aloofness in the midst of multiplicities” (1959, p 22).

The verb wabiru meant lacking things and being frustrated in ones wishes. Wabi is not mere poverty, however, but is transforming material insufficiency to discover the spiritual freedom which is beyond material things (Hago, 1989). The wabi aesthetic includes the ideas of poverty, insufficiency, rusticity, simplicity, naturalness, imperfection, irregularity, austerity, restraint, unpretentiousness, solitude, and timelessness. Joo expressed it in Fujiwara Teika’s poem (Hirota, 1995, p. 169).

As I gaze far about--

There’s neither blossom nor crimson leaf,
At sea’s edge: a rush hut in autumn
dusk.

Wabi is also related to the aesthetic in Noh of yugen, the profoundly mysterious impenetrable depth of things that is faint, subtle, and barely perceived, as expressed by Shuko and quoted by his pupil, Noh master Komparu Zempo, “The moon not glimpsed through rifts in clouds holds no interest” (Zempo Zodan, 1553, p. 480).

The wabi aesthetic does not deny, but in fact builds on the appreciation of the refined, elegant Chinese wares, tastefully using one or

two of these sophisticated objects in the simple four-and-a half-mat room, juxtaposed with rough native Japanese wares and ordinary objects like a wooden well bucket or bamboo lid rest. Rikyu's favored simple, irregular handmade black raku tea bowl, however, was not welcomed in Hideyoshi's all gold tearoom with gold utensils. The search for wabi experience is seen in the shichu no sankyo or "mountain hermitage in the middle of the city", which were tiny huts built on large estates for quiet retreat in the busy city. The great poet Basho said, "Appreciating the insufficient (wabishiki) is the fruit of having entered the Way" (Zuimonki).

The sabi aesthetic seems to overlap with wabi. From sabitaru or "to be solitary or desolate," it means solitude in the heart of nature, rust on old metals, and weather-worn stones. It can involve a lonely beauty, barest sufficiency, or worn elegance like the patina on old wood. The aesthetics of tea are experienced in the simplicity of the immediate and the particular. Rikyu is said to have placed flowers in the vase naturally as they grow in the field rather than in elaborate arrangement. One story tells of his cutting away all the blooming morning glories in his garden that Hideyoshi was coming to see so that he might truly see the one left in the vase.

Other aesthetic elements are incompleteness, asymmetry, and imperfection. Sen Soshitsu's "Afterword" to Okakura Tenshin's (1991) book notes that he called tea the "worship of the Imperfect," which allows for the process of perfecting, which is more important than perfection itself. Even Kenko's Essays in Idleness (Keene, 1994) said that incompleteness is what holds interest. Likewise asymmetry engages the participant in a process of movement and direction rather than being static symmetry.

Chado's aesthetics include other important aspects which will only be mentioned here, such as empty space ("no-thingness") used in a positive way, subdued or little color, contrasting textures and shapes (including a balance of yin/yang or in/yo in Japanese), and great sensitivity to cycles and rhythms of nature, seasonal changes, always reminding of a unified Cosmos, ones "place" in it, and the constant flow of change.

A psychologically fascinating area related to tea aesthetics is that of intersensory awareness or synaesthesia. Sen Soshitsu describes "tasting" a bowl of tea not just with the tongue but with the eyes, nose, ears, and hands. He also speaks of vision assuming a tactile quality and touch and sound experiences suggesting visual images (1980). A poem by his

ancestor Sen Sotan describes the nature of tea as the sound of windblown pines in an ink painting, thus blending sound and vision. Like transpersonal and health psychology, Buddhism espouses a bodymind unity instead of the dualism of Cartesian thought, with the Buddhist six senses including the usual five plus consciousness as another sense in itself. Suzuki (1938) cites a tea master's description of the purification of the five senses during tea and thus of the mind itself. Teacher Hamamoto Soshun wrote of tea's bringing all six senses to function simultaneously and harmoniously and thus lead one to tranquility (Odin, 1988).

Another fascinating psychological hypothesis is that chado may help to balance and integrate bihemispheric brain functioning (Harris, 1986). The left brain should be activated by the logical, step wise sequences as well as by verbal factual information about utensils. The right brain should be stimulated by visuo-spatial effects of the setting and movements and by the symbols and feelings. This could lead to an integrated awareness of environment, actions, thoughts, and feelings, thus once again transcending the dichotomies of body/mind and subject/object.

The training of tea practitioners is what would be expected for a social institution modeled, like almost all others in Japan from the family to the nation, on the patrilineal kin group and descended from feudal Japan. A social hierarchy extends from the Grand Master Rikyu, other ancestors, the current Grand Master and his wife, his son who is the heir next in line and his family, other biological family members, the highest ranking teachers (gyotei), mizuya sensei (those in day-and-night service and training to become gyotei), other teachers in rank by seniority, and students likewise ranked. Sempai/kohai or senior/junior relationships are an integral part of the structure. After just one day, one becomes sempai to others, and one remains kohai to others for life. Sempai are responsible to their sempai in turn for their kohai. Obedience without argument or questioning and correction, accepted without excuses, are expected. The most proper response seems to be 'hai!' ("yes"). Ideally relationships are characterized by respect for the teacher or sempai and benevolence and guidance for the student or kohai. Many aisatsu (formal greetings, bows, waiting on one's knees and knuckles) imply the proper respect.

One is in a sense a member of the ie (family "house") and its extended iemoto and thus responsible to all those above and below one and ultimately to the Grand Master to protect his and the "house's" reputation in one's

attire and conduct. One is responsible to set an example for kohai, respect the traditions, be frugal, and cooperate, always putting the welfare of the group above oneself and always submitting in the highly valued sunao (pure and sincere compliance).

Training tends to be in the tradition of rigorous Zen discipline, with no complaints about strenuous hours on one's knees nor about preparations (toban) like sawing charcoal, wiping tatami mats on hands and knees, and cleaning the garden or toilets. These are privileges of service and opportunities for spiritual development, especially death to and transcendence of the self.

Contrary to the implications of modern psychological research on effective shaping of human beings, pedagogical techniques of some tea teachers tend to employ more punishment than reward. "There is no praise for doing the right thing" is a saying. Behaviors and attitudes sometimes seem to be shaped less frequently with compliments and praise than with scolding and shaming in front of the group or ostracism by withdrawing eye contact or other attention. Like the chores, this, too, seems geared toward instilling self-abnegation and humility and, hopefully, a zeal to improve. Western research has shown positive reinforcement to be more effective for learning with less negative side effects than punishment. Research is needed on whether this applies to chado training or to Japanese people in general. A seemingly very effective method that tea teachers use is behavioral modeling or imitation of the teacher's or another student's movements while the latter is being corrected.

By many repetitions, one learns with one's body, developing a kind of "body memory" for the many procedures, which allows the experiences in awareness discussed earlier to occur. One may read and study illustrations of some of the published procedures, but the spiritual values and complex techniques are primarily learned by personal instruction. One is forbidden to take notes during lessons. Some procedures are "secret" and transmitted only orally after advancing to certain levels. Lest this idea of "advance" be misunderstood, one is often reminded of keeping the "beginner's mind" and of the circularity of beginning at one, going to ten, and returning to another "one" again, even as depicted in the Buddhist ox-herding picture series. Learning and strictly conforming to the prescribed procedures until they are mastered is required before any creativity with the traditional forms is allowed, typically after ten years.

Much of this article has already described aspects of the potential experience of

chado. In addition, the procedures give opportunity for exercise in concentration, focusing the awareness to a "point in front" (the literal meaning of temae, the term for a tea procedure) of the host. At the same time, there is ideally an integrated, fluid awareness of guests, oneself, and the whole context simultaneously. Many exercises like the kagetsu of the shichiji shiki (Seven Exercises), in which one draws by chance certain roles and continually switches them, are group drills in awareness, timing, coordination, cooperation, and flexibility.

Another part of the tea experience is the spaciousness of the uncluttered, simple room and the restraint from idle conversation or even music, with only the soothing sounds of tabi sliding on tatami mats, water boiling in the kettle, the tap of the teascoop on the bowl, the whisking of the tea. This is relaxing stress management for those of us who live in cluttered homes, crowded cities, and busy minds.

This article has already touched on many of the benefits of chado. The earliest proponents of tea in Japan also wrote of its benefits. The founder of Rinzaï Zen in Japan, Eisai, who brought matcha ("green tea") from China in 1191, wrote a pamphlet Kissa Yojoki ("The Preservation of Health through Drinking Tea"). His disciple and friend, the priest Myoe, to whom he brought seeds at Kozanji, had ten values of tea inscribed on a tea kettle (Sadler, 1992, 94). Each of these can be reviewed briefly in modern terms: Tea has the blessing of all the deities. Chado's syncretic religious origins and compatibility with all religions were discussed. Tea promotes filial piety. The hereditary position of tea master and the ie and iemoto (family/house) structure discussed earlier give rise to a sense of belonging and loyalty to the group. The conformity to tradition, the homogeneity of the group, and the intimate tea room ideally for no more than five guests add to this sense of identity and having a "place." The present Grand Master of Urasenke makes tea offerings every morning to Rikyu, other ancestors and family members, past iemoto, his late Zen master, and all deceased followers of tea. Tea drives away the devil. In modern thought, the previous discussions of the death and transcendence of the self and the development of wisdom and compassion seem applicable here. Tea vanishes drowsiness. Certainly the caffeine keeps one awake for study and meditation and can interfere with sleep! Tea keeps the five viscera in harmony, and it wards off disease.

The value of chado at reducing stress, which is at least a contributing factor in probably

all disease, was mentioned above. At the same time, the individual must be careful to manage optimally the challenging stress of the training and of holding tea gatherings themselves. Also, one could become attached to “form” forgetting the “emptiness” and transience behind form and become stressed over acquisitiveness and indebtedness for and preservation of expensive utensils.

In addition to stress-management, chado seem supported by recent research (McCoy, 1997) that tea does indeed help prevent disease and promote longevity. Apparently the “flavonoid” EGCg, a potent antioxidant, helps prevent cell damage which is believed to contribute to over 50 diseases. Evidence suggests that tea reduces the risk of strokes and fatal heart attacks by the flavonoids’ inhibiting blood platelets’ clumping. Although other correlates may account for such findings, tea drinkers also have lower cholesterol levels and lower blood pressure. Over twenty studies with animals give evidence that tea helps prevent some cancers, especially those of digestive and respiratory systems and of skin. It also contains fluoride which strengthens tooth enamel and helps prevent decay.

Tea strengthens friendships. Common interests, cooperative work, and sharing of both daily and transcendent experiences form lasting bonds. Tea disciplines body and mind. The body/mind experiences described earlier exemplify this. The erect posture, development of body memory for fluid movements, and simultaneous awareness of self, other, environment, utensils and the formless oneness permeating all ideally develops and generalizes to daily activities. Tea destroys the passions. Tea gives a peaceful death. The fostering of health allows a peaceful, natural death without the suffering of disease. The development of the four principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility or enlightenment would foster a consciousness that could easily make a transition into the Oneness beyond/behind/beneath/within the Many.

Having only briefly introduced some of the psychological aspects of the Way of Tea, much more thorough research and analysis of these and others is needed. As Sen Soshitsu said on the first page of the first issue of the first volume of the Chanoyu Quarterly, with its great potential for affecting daily life, chado is a “subject for careful study, especially from the standpoint of social science” (1970, p. 1).

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