D.T. Suzuki’s Understanding of Tea Ceremony: An Analysis

KUMAR MANOJ

Daisetz T. Suzuki was a pioneer in introducing and propagating Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture to the non-Japanese world. The main factor which inspired me to write on this topic are the works of Suzuki themselves, especially his work called “Zen and Japanese Culture”. It is supposed to be one of the most outstanding works in English dealing with the tea ceremony as well as various other aspects of Japanese culture, philosophically. The importance of the work is proved by the fact that this book has been authoritatively quoted in almost every other work after its time.

The aesthetic sensibility and simplicity of the medieval Japanese art and culture is generally attributed to Zen Buddhism. Zen extended the aesthetic sensibility of the Japanese into many new areas of life and art, and the tea-ceremony is one of them. In this paper, I have made an attempt to enquire into a few facets of the tea-ceremony, and its relationship with Zen Buddhism as viewed by D. T. Suzuki. Suzuki makes a very strong connection between these two, and emphasizes the Zen Buddhistic nature of the tea-ceremony. This is area where I have concentrated and wish to make an enquiry into the intensity of the relationship between the tea-ceremony and Zen Buddhism through asking a few questions: why does tea-ceremony symbolize Buddhism? What kind of impact has Zen left on the tea-ceremony? And, what is the tea-ceremony—a philosophy, or just a ceremony, or an art, or mere a unique style of social intercourse?

1. I have tried to answer the first question through the historical development of tea. Tea is most intimately connected with Buddhism in its historical journey into Japan. It is a fact that the first introduction of tea to Japan, took place through Buddhist monks, although there is no uniformity among the scholars on the date and the period of the introduction of tea into Japan. D. T. Suzuki gives the credit to Eisai for the propagation of tea into Japan and calls him “the father of tea cultivation”. 
According to him, Eisai, the Zen teacher, brought tea seeds from China and had them cultivated in his friend’s monastery ground. While Okakura Tenshin says in his work “The Book of Tea” that as early as 729, Emperor Shomu served tea to one hundred monks at his palace in Nara. He goes on saying that in 801 the monk Saicho brought back some seeds of the tea plant from China and planted them in Hieizan. In another source by Soshitsu Sen, we are informed that tea was probably first introduced to Japan during the regency of prince Shotoku (572-622) which is much earlier than the time suggested by either D. T. Suzuki or Okakura Tenshin.

He says that one of the most important things being adopted by the society at that time was Buddhism, and many Japanese priests went to China to study the new religion. It was these men who brought back tea to their home land, that is Japan.

Here we see that there is no consent among the scholars regarding the timing of the introduction of tea into Japan which is equally important as much as the development of the tea-ceremony. Yet in all the cases above mentioned, we notice that arrival of tea into Japan is anyhow associated with Buddhist monks. Almost every work describing the development of the tea-ceremony in Japan, deals the aspects which are related to the monastic life and Buddhism. Although Saicho brought tea to Japan prior to Eisai, Eisai is known as the father of tea cultivation in Japan. This is because, he was the first to bring powdered tea and the first to write a book on the subject—Kissa-Yojoki. In his book Eisai explained the medicinal virtues of tea, saying it added to the drinkers’ health and longevity. Eisai (1141-1215) went to China to study Zen Buddhism. While he was there in China, he realized that tea was an indispensable part of Zen temple life. When he returned to Japan in 1191, he brought with him some seeds and attempted to use tea as a tool for propagating Zen Buddhism in Japan. Successful in growing tea in the area of the present Fukuoka prefecture, Eisai convinced the priest Myoe (1173-1232) to plant seeds at the Kozan-ji temple in Kyoto, where plants eventually flourished. Tea-cultivation spread from Kozan-ji to Uji, South of Kyoto. As the availability of the tea increased, more and more court nobles and families of high rank began to drink it.

By the fourteenth century, tea drinking had spread from the upper classes to Samurai, and even some commoners. At this time, tea gathering became quite popular among Samurai class. Tea gathering also centered around contests called...
“Tocha” in which stakes were wagered and participants vied with one another to distinguish different tea tastes.

At the same time, tea drinking was developed into a solemn ceremony at Buddhist temples. In the appointed room, a picture of Shakyamuni, might be hung in the tokonoma along with a kakemono (hanging scroll) from China. Flowers would be arranged and incense burned in a brazier.

Gradually, tea drinking became a part of Japanese life. By 1400, tea was being sold on the streets to commoners. But the method of preparing and drinking tea was becoming more and more systematized. The Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435-1490) retained Noami (1397-1471) and his grandson Soami (1472-1523). Under these two men “shoin cha”—a gathering held in a reception room and employing Chinese utensils—became more formalized and fashionable. It was during this period that “daisu”—the Chinese stand used for holding tea utensils, was introduced into shoin cha. As this kind of tea gathering became more popular with the upper classes, the reception rooms in which it was held became more lavish and gorgeously appointed.

As a reaction to this Murata Shuko (1422-1502) devised a new style of tea gathering to be held in a small room with a number of guests. This was called “soan cha”, or grass-hut tea. Shuko had first studied the style of soin cha and later became a disciple of the Zen Buddhist monk Ikkyu (1394-1481). It was the austerity and simplicity of the latter that led him to serve tea in a small tea room of only four-and-one-half tatami (9 feet square). In this confined, austere room, its tokonoma ornamented with only a single hanging scroll, he pursued the beauty of the way of tea, using simple, imperfect Japanese utensils as well as more sophisticated Japanese and Chinese utensils.

Gradually the popularity of lavish shoin cha gave way to that of soan cha. It is for this reason, D. T. Suzuki called Shuko the originator of the art of tea, because it was his artistic genius which developed and succeeded in adopting it to Japanese taste. Later, Jo-o (1504-1555), and especially Rikyu further improved it and gave a finishing touch to what is known as cha-no-yu, generally translated as the tea-ceremony.

It will be interesting to add here that we can trace the history of tea-room for
The Vimalakirti Sutra has it that the Buddha heard the layman Vimalakirti (Yuima in Japanese) was sick and asked each of the various Bodhisattvas in turn to call on him. But each was afraid to face Vimalakirti because in the past he had bested them in debate. Finally Manjusri (Monju in Japanese) agreed to go, and all 80,000 Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, Arhats, Bhikus, etc came along to witness. At Vimalakirti’s ten-by-ten hut, the legion was welcomed, seated, and after the debate had ensured, served what may be the first kaiseki meal (a small meal often served at a tea-ceremony). The big debate ends with Vimalakirti’s lion’s roar of silence.

The Vimalakirti Sutra, besides teaching the Mahayana philosophy of emptiness, is also the source of several other ‘beginnings’ in relation to the tea-ceremony. As pointed out, Vimalakirti probably served the first Kaiseki meal, but more important than this is the ten-by-ten foot hut, which became a standard for a hermit’s hut in Japan, and later the standard for the tea huts as well. The sutra is quoted as the source of the hut of Kamo no Chomei (1153-1216) in his “An Account of My Hut.” This is a perfect description of a tea hut many hundred years before such a hut was used for the tea ceremony. The fact that Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra is given as the source for such huts is proof of their metaphorical nature, because no physical hut could possibly have held the 80,000 spiritual beings that were contained in the one, in the sutra. The symbolic importance of this sutra in Japan can be further evidenced by the fact that it was one of three original texts studied and commented on by prince Shotoku. This was the very beginning of Buddhism in Japan.

Looking at the historical development of tea and the tea-ceremony in Japan, we notice its close connection to the Buddhist monks and Buddhist monasteries from its outset. That’s why most of the works on the subject take it as a Buddhist art. In fact, works describing the development of the tea-ceremony in Japan, deal mostly with those aspects which are related to the monastic life. And surprisingly, almost nothing has been discussed about the tea-ceremony as a popular culture. We hardly find a comprehensive work describing the historical development of tea as popular culture or something which is in practice among common people.

2. It is one of the most difficult problems in the study of medieval culture to access the influence of Zen Buddhism on the tea-ceremony. D. T. Suzuki’s genius...
in the philosophical description of the tea-ceremony with its relation to Zen Buddhism has reflected very well in his works. This relationship can be well understood in regard to its soteriological goal, with emphasis on emptiness.

The very first sentence D. T. Suzuki uses to compare Zen and the tea-ceremony in his book “Zen and Japanese Culture” is that the “common to Zen and the tea-ceremony is the constant attempt both make at simplification. The elimination of the unnecessary is achieved by Zen in its intuitive grasp of final reality; by the art of tea, in the way of living, typified by serving tea in the tea room”. This explanation of simplification regarding the tea-ceremony is related to avoidance of verbal or intellectual complexities in Zen Buddhism which insists on handling things as they are in themselves and look into the things as they are. The simplicity of the tea-ceremony is very well reflected in D. T. Suzuki’s description of a tea-hut which is inconspicuous, solitary, and erected somewhere as if it was a part of nature and not especially constructed by human hands. The entire atmosphere of a tea room is perfectly described by D. T. Suzuki like this:

*Inside the tea room we never find things which do not conform to simplicity. The tea room is small and the ceiling not at all high even for the stature of average Japanese. It is devoid of decorations, except in the alcove (tokonoma) where a kakemono is hung and before which stands a flower vase containing perhaps a solitary flower not yet in full bloom. As one looks around, in spite of its obvious simplicity the room betrays every mark of thoughtful designing: the windows are irregularly inserted; the ceiling is not of one pattern; the materials used, simple and un-ornamental, are of various kinds; the room is divided by the post obliquely setting off one corner for tea utensils; the floor has a small square opening as a fire place where hot water is boiling in an artistically-shaped iron kettle. The papered shoji covering the windows admit only soft light, shutting off all the direct sunshine, which, when it is too strong for the tea men’s sensibility, is further screened by a rustic sudare hanging just outside one of the windows. As one sits here quietly before the fire place he becomes conscious of the burning incense. The odour is singularly nerve-soothing: the fragrant flower produces a contrary effect on the senses. Thus composed in mind, one hears a soft breeze passing through the needle-leaves of the*
pine tree; the sound mingles with the trickling of water from bamboo pipe into the stone basin. The flow and the breeze are rhythmical and soothing to the mind of sitter inside the hut. In fact, they stimulate his meditative mood to move on to the bedrock of his being.

D. T. Suzuki explains the relationship between Zen and the art of tea through four principles recognized as regulating the tea-ceremony—harmony, reverence, purity, and tranquility. The first two are social or ethical and Confucian in spirit, although harmony relates to the Taoist idea of harmony with nature, as well. Purity, the third principle is Shinto; the hand washing and mouth rinsing remind us of ablution. But when it goes beyond mere superficiality and acquires a deeper sense, it touches upon Taosim, as the object of discipline. In both religions (Taoism and Shinto) it is important to free one’s mind from defilements of the senses. The purification of the heart is Buddhist. But the art of tea is here more concerned with general cleansing and orderliness which tend to make the mind free from unnecessary psychological encumbrance. Tranquility is Buddhistic.

Despite the diversity of these terms, however, their unity in Zen is rooted in China, for they were the underlying principles of strict discipline in Chan monasteries. “It is also recorded that a pupil of Po-yun Shou-tuan (1045-1072), a Chan master of Sung period, elevated the four concepts into the basic verities of communal tea drinking among the monks.” Takuan (1575-1645), a Zen master of Japan, uses the term in his discourse on cha-no-yu. Rikyu himself apparently emphasized “the harmony of tea and Zen.” But it was not until later that these four elements became emphasized within Japanese school. “The four elements—harmony, reverence, purity, and tranquility, did not from the outset, form part of the spirit of the way of tea. It was at a time when the latter threatened to drift along aimlessly as a mere hobby that these elements were introduced to stop the drift by means of an all-out resistance; a barrier thrown up by those for whom tea was a way of Zen.”

For D. T. Suzuki, ‘the above mentioned four elements are very essential to bring the art of tea to a successful, satisfying end, in fact, they are all the essential constituents of a brotherly and orderly life, which is no other than the life of a Zen monastery’. Here it is important to mention that, in spite of using the term “harmony”, Suzuki prefers to use the term “gentleness of spirit”. For him this term
D. T. Suzuki's Understanding of Tea Ceremony: An Analysis (KUMAR MANOJ) (163)

seems to describe better the spirit governing the whole procedure of the art of tea. Harmony refers to form of which gentleness is suggestive of an inward feeling. The general atmosphere of the tea room tends to create this kind of gentleness all around—gentleness of touch, gentleness of odor, gentleness of light, and gentleness of sound. He goes further saying that gentleness of spirit is the foundation of our life on earth. If the art of tea claims to establish a “Buddha-land” in its small group, it has to start with gentleness of spirit. As far as reverence is concerned, it is the reflection of one’s own unworthiness, that is, the realization of one’s limitations, physical and intellectual, moral and spiritual; rather than a religious feeling for a being supposed to be higher than ourselves. It is sincerity or simplicity of heart. Purity can be said to be the contribution of Japanese mentality. Then comes tranquility which is the most essential factor in the art of tea and without it there can be no tea-ceremony whatever. It is in this connection that Zen enters deeply into the art of tea. Probably it is the reason that the tea-ceremony is considered a Buddhist art.

It must be mentioned here that even if Japan did not produce any philosophical system of its own, it was original enough to embody in its practical life all that could profitably be extracted from these oriental schools of philosophy including Buddhism, and to turn them into the material for its spiritual enhancement and artistic appreciation. Japanese people manifested these philosophies into the form of the art of living, and the art of tea is one of its examples.

Tranquility has been explained through two very important terms most oftenly used to describe medieval Japanese culture—wabi and sabi. Although there has been a lot of debate on the explanation of these two words, in short, we can say that sabi applies more to the individual objects and environment generally; while wabi to the living of a life ordinarily associated with poverty or insufficiency or imperfection. Sabi is more objective, whereas wabi is more subjective.

For us, tea drinking is an act which we practice in our everyday life, but we are informed that when it is taken by Zen monks, it turns out to be a momentous event that helps us to realize enlightenment. The essence of Zen is not restricted to meditation or just sitting; the tea-ceremony just like Zazen, is also a way of experiencing Zen. ‘Rikyu teaches that the art of tea consists in nothing else but in boiling water, making tea, and sipping it. This is simple enough as far as it goes. Human
life, we can say, consists in being born, eating and drinking, working and sleeping, marrying and giving birth to children, and finally in passing away. Nothing seems to be simpler than living this life, when it is so stated. But how many of us are there who can live this kind of matter-of-fact life, cherishing no desire, leaving no regrets. In fact, ‘tea-ceremony is not just drinking tea, but it involves all the activities leading to it, all the utensils used in it, the entire atmosphere surrounding the procedure, and last of all, what is really most important phases, the frame of mind or spirit which mysteriously grows out of the combination of all these factors. It is the art of cultivating a psychosphere, or the psychic atmosphere or the inner field of consciousness, which is generated within oneself.

That’s why Suzuki thinks that the tea-ceremony is a spiritual training which can help one to enter into a realm of transcendentalism or of emptiness. He holds the idea that tea-ceremony is closely related to Zen Buddhism. Here it is important to mention one point which stands out clearly in the survey of the culture of medieval Japan, that this aestheticism of the age evolved directly from earlier times. The criteria of Zen in the arts coincided with feelings that were also indigenously Japanese and had always governed native tastes. Thus, Zen Buddhism, brought from China in the late 12th and 13th Centuries, found a particularly congenial environment in which to flourish culturally. The way Suzuki explains the relation between Zen and the tea-ceremony as if there was an essential relationship from the very beginning. But it was not until the 16th Century that Zen was truly extolled as a major influence on the arts, especially on the culture of tea.

3. As far as the third question is concerned, it is very difficult to categorize the tea-ceremony in different classes like philosophy, art, ceremony, or a style of social intercourse. In fact, the tea-ceremony embraces all these variations in itself. It depends on how a person takes it. I have already discussed the philosophical aspects earlier. So, I will come to the other points. In one way, the tea-ceremony is a mere entertainment for visitors to a monastery or sometimes merely a diversion among the monks themselves. But at other times it may be a way which can lead one to transcendental wisdom that is none other than enlightenment. It is also said that the tea-ceremony was used for political purposes, especially by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, although he was a great patron of the art. It is also an art, which a
D. T. Suzuki's Understanding of Tea Ceremony: An Analysis (KUMAR MANOJ) (165)

person needs to learn. Because if one does not know the rules related to this art, one would be unsure as to the best movements of the body and thus would not be able to perform well. It is also a style of social intercourse because in the tea room guests of various social grades are entertained with no discrimination, for once there in the tea room, everyone is equal and they talk with due reverence to each other on subject which they are interested in.

One of the most difficult problems while dealing with this aspect of Japanese culture is the range and its diversity, which reflects its importance in the Japanese cultural sphere. In fact, it’s an important key to understand the medieval Japanese culture. Tea-ceremony provided the base for the development of various arts and culture. It revolutionized the classical architecture and interior decoration in Japan. Most of the celebrated gardens of Japan were laid out by those who were experts of the tea-ceremony. Japanese pottery also would probably never have attained its high quality of excellence if the tea-ceremony had not lent it its inspiration. It is very difficult indeed to find any department of art in which the tea-ceremony has not left its mark. It has instructed the proper spirit in which a Japanese approaches flowers, and has given emphasis to Japanese people’s natural love of simplicity, and shown them the beauty of humility. In fact, it has entered the life of Japanese people, whether they are aware of it or not. The point here is that, other aspects of Japanese art and culture, effected and developed through the tea-ceremony are easily visible in present day life and are being practiced commonly in present Japan; but not the tea-ceremony as such. It has never fully been able to come out of its Buddhistic nature in the mind of the people.

註
1 Another important work is “Zen in the Art of Tea Ceremony: A Guide to the Tea Way”, by Horst Hammitzsch, which deals the subject to death.

—334—
(166) D. T. Suzuki's Understanding of Tea Ceremony: An Analysis (KUMAR MANOJ)


9  Ibid., p. 273.


11 See D. T. Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese Culture, pp. 276-278 or Horst Hammitzsch’s Zen in the Art of Tea Ceremony, pp. 66-68 for two different renderings in English.


14 Ibid., p. 295.