

# *The Book of Tea*



# *The Book of Tea*

by Kakuzo Okakura

*Retold  
by Michael Brase*

*Japan & Stuff Press*

*The Book of Tea* was originally published in 1906.  
The present edition is a retelling with some abridgement.

Cover design by Koichi Kawamura.

Edited by Curtis Kennedy.

Published by Japan & Stuff Press, Mihara 2-19-60-202,  
Asaka-shi, Saitama-ken 351-0025, Japan.

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ISBN-13: 978-4-9902848-3-1

First edition, September 2008

[www.japanandstuff.com](http://www.japanandstuff.com)

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## Foreword

*The Book of Tea* is a description of the history, underlying philosophy, and aesthetics of the Japanese tea ceremony. It is also, and more importantly, a book about how to live a meaningful life. It is about nature and simplicity, about art and beauty, about the unfathomable depth in the small things in life that surround us. In this edition of *The Book of Tea*, the author, Kakuzo Okakura, writes:

*The way of tea is founded on a love of what is beautiful in our common everyday lives. It teaches purity and harmony, mutual respect, and the importance of nature and the individual. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect. It is an attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible world of ours.*

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first is an introduction to the way of tea, in China, Japan, and the

West. The second describes the rise of schools of tea in China as a pastime of cultured society, and how the way of tea made its way to Japan, where it was elevated to the status of a religion devoted to beauty. The third chapter discusses the philosophical foundations of the way of tea, which lie first in Taoism and later in the worldview of Zen Buddhism. The fourth chapter describes the utter simplicity of the room where the tea ceremony is conducted, the asymmetry of its interior decoration, and its avoidance of repetition. The fifth chapter discusses the proper approach to art, which is so important to understanding the way of tea. The sixth describes the essential role of flowers in the way of tea and in life, with a distinction being made between the “tea master’s” approach and the “flower master’s” approach. The last chapter is devoted to the tea masters and their influence on Japanese architecture, crafts, gardens, and more. Okakura writes that “the tea master sought to be something more than an artist; he sought to be art itself.”

The author, Kakuzo Okakura (1863–1913), was born in Yokohama five years before the outset of the Meiji period, which marked the end of over 200 years of national isolation and the beginning of Japan’s headlong rush to trans-

form itself into a military and industrial power that could resist Western incursions and colonization. Yokohama was a boisterous international port, and Okakura's father, a samurai stationed there for business reasons, was a progressive thinker, who started Okakura learning English at the age of six. Okakura's most important works, including *The Book of Tea* (1906), were written in English, and devoted to explaining and defending Japanese and Asian culture.

The era in which Okakura lived was characterized by Western inroads into Asian countries. The West, thanks to the industrial revolution, was materially and militarily superior to the East, and considered itself to be culturally superior as well. Through heroic effort, Japan built up its industry and military, and when it emerged victorious from the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, it became the first non-Western country to achieve international recognition by Western powers.

Okakura, however, was not concerned with this type of recognition. He wanted recognition for Japanese and Eastern arts and culture, and he felt the need to preserve them from increasing Westernization. In 1887 he was one of the founders of the first Japanese fine arts academy, and in

1898 he helped found the Japanese Institute of Fine Arts. In 1904 he was invited to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as a curator, and in 1910 he became the first head of the Asian art division of that Museum. He died in 1913 at the age of fifty, having devoted his life to preserving Japan's traditional cultural heritage. Important figures influenced by Okakura include the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, the American poet Ezra Pound, the Indian poet Rabindranth Tagore, the American art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, and the British translator Arthur Waley.

Part of the “Classics Retold to be Read, Not just Revered” series, the aim of this retelling of *The Book of Tea* is to make the book more widely accessible—without diluting its intellectual content—for both emerging adults seeking broader perspectives and intellectually curious older readers. The book will be of particular interest to those who want a deeper insight into the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and Japanese aesthetics. The text is set in a slightly larger typeface for easier reading.

The Publisher  
2008



*Chapter 1*

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*The Cup of Humanity*

ea was first considered a medicine and later developed into a beverage. In eighth-century China, it was part of the world of poetry and a pastime of cultured society. In fifteenth-century Japan, it was ennobled to the level of a religion devoted to beauty. This is called the way of tea, or what I call Teatism. The way of tea is founded on a love of what is beautiful in our common everyday lives. It teaches purity and harmony, mutual respect, and the importance of nature and the individual. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect. It is an attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible world of ours.

## *The Cup of Humanity*

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The way of tea is not merely a love of beauty—that is, aestheticism. It also expresses a point of view about human beings and nature, for it combines forces with ethics and religion. It also concerns hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; economics, for it finds comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; and morality, for it establishes our relationship with the universe. In making all its followers equal in their love of beauty, it expresses the true spirit of Eastern democracy.

Japan's isolation from the rest of the world for over 200 years during the Edo period provided the opportunity for the Japanese people to look within themselves. One result of this introspection was the birth of the way of tea. There is hardly any area of Japanese life that has not felt its influence—whether in our homes and habits, clothing and food, pottery or lacquer or painting, even literature. No student of Japanese culture can possibly ignore its existence. It found its way into the greatest mansions and the humblest dwellings. Our farmers know how to arrange flowers, and our laborers salute the beauty of artistically placed water and rock in a Japanese garden.

Those who cannot feel the smallness of the great things

in themselves are likely to overlook the greatness of small things in others. The average Westerner, self-satisfied and proud, sees the tea ceremony as another childish oddity from the East. When Japan devoted itself to such peaceful arts as tea, the average Westerner tended to regard Japan as primitive and backward. However, now that its armies are successfully committing wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields, it is called civilized.

Recently there has been much discussion of the Code of the Samurai or Bushidō, which, as the Art of Death, encourages our soldiers to rejoice in self-sacrifice. And yet, little attention has been given to the way of tea, which represents our Art of Life. It would be far better to remain primitive and backward if our claim to civilization rests on the gruesome glory of war. It would be far better to wait for the day when our peaceful arts and ideals receive the respect they deserve.

When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East? We Asians are often shocked to hear the web of fact and fancy that has been woven about us. Indian spirituality is seen as ignorance. Chinese seriousness is seen as stupidity. Japanese patriotism is seen as mere fatalism. It is

even said that we do not feel pain the way Westerners do.

Go ahead, amuse yourselves at our expense. Asia returns the compliment. You would be surprised at the things we have imagined and written about you, both good and bad, starting with the fact that you hide bushy tails under your clothing. Worse, we have thought you to be the most impractical people on the face of the earth, for you preach what you never practice. And your Christian missionaries travel the world to teach, but not to learn.

Perhaps as a follower of the way of tea, I should not be so outspoken. Tea's spirit of politeness requires that you say what you are expected to say, no more. And yet, I will not be polite. Too much harm has already been done by a lack of understanding between East and West. I feel no need to apologize for making a small contribution toward a better understanding.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, we might have been spared the bloody Russo-Japanese War (1905-1906) if only Russia had condescended to knowing Japan better. Dire consequences lie in wait for the world if the East is seen as being of little importance. European imperialism can, if it wishes, raise the absurd cry of the Yellow Peril, but

it should not be surprised if Asia awakens to the cruel sense of the White Disaster. You may laugh at us for our delicate ways, but we can laugh back at you for your lack of them. Believe it or not, the East is better off in some ways than the West.

### *Europe and Tea*

Strangely enough, the only meeting ground for all humanity has been tea. It is the only Asian custom that commands universal esteem. The white man has scoffed at our religions and our morals, but has accepted tea without hesitation. The afternoon tea is now an important social event in Western society. In the delicate clatter of trays and saucers, in the soft rustle of feminine hospitality, in the common give and take about cream and sugar, we know that the way of tea has become firmly established. In the resigned way that guests wait as the preparations for tea proceed, we know that here the Eastern spirit reigns supreme.

The earliest European mention of tea was made by an Arabian traveler to China, who stated that the duty on salt and tea was Canton's main source of revenue. Marco Polo noted that a Chinese minister of finance was removed from

office in 1285 for appropriating money from the tea tax for personal use.

In the “age of discovery,” Europeans came into closer contact with the Far East. At the end of the sixteenth century, Hollanders brought back the news that a pleasant drink was made from the leaves of a bush in the East. The travelers Giovanni Batista Ramusio (1559), L. Almeida (1576), Maffeno (1588), and Tareira (1610) also mention tea.

In 1610, tea was first brought to Europe in ships of the Dutch East India Company. Tea reached France in 1636 and Russia in 1638. In 1650 tea was welcomed in England, where it was described as “that excellent drink which is approved by all doctors and which the Chinese call Tcha, but which everyone else calls Tay, or Tee.”

Like all good things, the spread of tea met with opposition. Dissenters like Henry Saville (1678) denounced tea drinking as a filthy custom. Jonas Hanway (*Essay on Tea*, 1756) wrote that tea caused men to shrink in stature and lose their good looks, and women to be robbed of their beauty. At first, tea was very expensive, and could only be enjoyed by the upper classes. Yet it spread with remarkable speed. The London coffee houses of the early half of the

eighteenth century quickly became tea houses, where wits such as Addison and Steele amused themselves over “a dish of tea.”

The drink soon became indispensable to life, and therefore subject to taxation. Taxes, of course, are what led to the important role tea played in American history. Colonial America had endured much from its English masters until its tea was placed under a heavy tax. This led to the Boston Tea Party, when chests of tea were thrown into Boston harbor in protest. This act marked the beginning of the American Revolution.

There is a subtle charm in the taste of tea that makes it irresistible as a drink and powerful as a subject for thought. It is not proud like wine, not self-conscious like coffee, nor does it have the coy smile of cocoa. In 1711, the *Spectator* wrote that all good families should set aside an hour each morning for tea, bread and butter, and reading the *Spectator*. Samuel Johnson described himself as a hardened and shameless tea drinker for twenty years, “who with tea amused the evening, with tea solaced the midnight, and with tea welcomed the morning.”

Charles Lamb, a professed tea lover, sounded the true

note of the way of tea when he said that his greatest pleasure was to do a good deed in secret and to have it discovered by accident. Indeed, the way of tea is the art of concealing beauty so that it may later be discovered, the art of suggesting rather than revealing. It is the noble secret of laughing at oneself, calmly yet thoroughly. It is humor itself, the smile of philosophy.

In this sense, all genuine humorists can be called tea philosophers—Thackeray for instance and Shakespeare, of course. The Decadent poets, in their protests against materialism, are followers of the way of tea. In fact, this is how the East and West can perhaps finally come together, in a humble approach to the imperfections of life.

The peace of modern humanity is shattered by blind struggles for wealth and power. The world is groping in the shadows of egotism and low-mindedness. Knowledge is gained by doing wrong; good deeds are done for practical ends. East and West, caught in this perfect storm, struggle to find the secret of life. A divine teacher is needed to show us the way.

In the meantime, however, let us have a cup of tea. The glow of the afternoon sun brightens the bamboo. The foun-

## *Europe and Tea*

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tains are bubbling with delight. The sighing of the pine trees is heard in our boiling tea kettle. Let us sit back a moment and ponder the passage of time and the passing of things. Let us linger for a moment in the beautiful foolishness of life.