

GLOBAL TEA HUT

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茶花藝



CHABANA
FLOWERS FOR TEA



Voices from the Hut

This month, we have a special account of Wu De's retreat at the Esalen Institute this year. We were planning to have these retreats be annual, but it is hard to make plans as things stand now. Retreats are all on hold. But this wonderful journey recorded here, along with some lessons to contemplate, might be the food for our own personal retreats for the foreseeable future. There is a lot to relate to here, and even more to steep, boil or whisk.

If you would like to contribute some writing to Voices from the Hut or have an idea for an interesting topic, you can reach Matthew on the Global Tea Hut app (in the "Voices from the Hut" section), on Instagram (IG: foldedleaves), or at the email: voicesfromthehut@gmail.com. We cannot wait to read all the exciting articles to come!

BOWLS OF SOUL IN BIG SUR

茶人: *Andjelka Jankovic*

"Like you, I am scared to go within..."

These were the first words that Wu De spoke at the beginning of a week of Cha Dao at the Esalen Institute earlier this year... I had tried to attend a course at the Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan for many years, but the busyness of my life always seemed to take over and I could never align the time to go. This came to a head last year, when my work in marketing for one of the world's biggest food brands was becoming increasingly unfulfilling and an inner voice telling me that I had a greater purpose was practically screaming. I decided to take a career break and go on a quest through North America to "live into the answers" (in Rilke's stirring sentiment) to the questions of my life. Unfortunately, the moment I left my job, sold almost everything and moved the last of my possessions into my brother's shed, it was also announced that the Center would be closing.

All I really wanted to do at that point was get lost in Nature, so I left my native Australia and went hiking, traveling all the way from the top of the Canadian Rockies to the southernmost tip of the Rocky Mountains range in the United States over the next six months. During my trip, I learned that Wu De would be holding a meditation and tea retreat at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. However, by the time I went to sign up, it was sold out—naturally, since it was at Esalen. I am not one to give up easily, so I persisted and pursued the gracious (read: patient) staff at the Esalen Institute reception over the coming days and weeks, hoping that a spot would become available for any reason. However, after about the sixth phone call, a member of the staff politely told me: "Look, you're fiftieth on the waitlist; I'd forget about it." It was not happening, so I had to let it go.

And I did... But a few months later, in February, I got an email out of nowhere that a last-minute spot had opened up on the retreat. I was volunteering at an intentional community in New Mexico at the time, and getting to Big Sur would be a logistical nightmare, not to mention my visa would be ending soon—but I was overcome with such a strong feeling (that could only be described as a "full-body yes") that I took the opportunity. I booked my ticket and decided I would figure out the rest later—like how I was going to make it back to L.A. after the retreat to catch my flight home to Australia (ultimately, a Russian tea sister gave me a ride).

After two flights and a scenic bus ride along the famous HWY 1, I arrived at the edge of the continent—literally. Esalen is built right on the cliffs of the Coast and is one of the most staggeringly spectacular places I've ever been.





A pioneer in holistic health and spiritual healing, Esalen is like staying at an upscale ashram that's also a wellness haven for the senses. It is surrounded by the wildness of the ocean, a painting-like sky, giant towering trees and an invigorating sea breeze that makes you close your eyes and pause just to take it all in. The year-round fruit and vegetable gardens, bounty of flowers and bees, and the untamed redwood forest surrounding the property put Nature at the center of our immersion with Wu De and the Way of Tea.

Walking into the hall where we would convene every day, I caught sight of the retreat schedule, which would have had any tea lover in rapture: meditation, tea class, tea practice, discourse and mealtimes repeated

across the next five wonderful days. I was coming into the experience curious and eager to uncover why I've always felt a strong pull to tea. I'd looked for tea ceremonies everywhere I traveled and attended memorable ones in Japan, Canada and the United States. Back home in Perth, I'd tracked down a copy of Wu De's book *The Way of Tea* and it resonated with me at a bone-deep level. It was the Truth with a capital T. But I didn't know where to even begin with my own tea practice. And so, I kept searching. I came to the retreat with the intention of integrating tea into my daily life and learning how to share my love of tea with others in ceremony. In retrospect, I was starting a deeper relationship with tea and with myself as well.

I was also excited to meet Wu De in person after listening to a few of his conversations on various podcasts, including *Life of Tea*. I am almost certain I accidentally gave him those "oh my gosh, it's Wu De" eyes when we first crossed paths in the dining hall (a look he later told us that he doesn't like, as he would prefer to be anonymous). Hearing Wu De speak is a real treat; he is eloquent and self-aware, and I was drawn to his humility and humor, as well as his masterful storytelling. In real life, he is just an ordinary person—in his words, "I am just a dude. I am broken and dented, too." But as many of us know, Wu De is more than that. He is a student at heart and a sometimes-reluctant teacher, with a special ability to articulate Buddhist



concepts with contemporary relevance and weave in cultural and poetic references with illuminating gravitas. He is also deeply in love with life, which makes him someone to whom many people are drawn. Like the Dao, you can't explain Wu De so much as you have to experience him.

We started each day with meditation and three bowls of tea in silence. And each day, when those first few sips of hot liquid entered my mouth and moved down my throat, I felt them go all the way into my roots. So profound in its simplicity, a sense of "calm joy" (as Wu De often says) washed over me and an aliveness arose in my spirit—an embodied presence that had rarely touched my life before, except through music and being in the mountains.

Over the next five days, we—a group of fifty eager students of the Leaf—immersed ourselves in tea, Zen philosophy and community. For us first-timers, this meant practicing and fumbling together while taking notes and imprints from the more experienced Chajin on the retreat. And at the end of each day, groups of new tea friends would come together to bathe in the healing mineral waters of the Esalen hot springs. I remember one night sitting there looking up at the constellations of stars in contemplation, wondering if life could actually get any better than a day of tea ceremony, meditation, wild nature, amazing farm-to-table food (I'm still thinking about that sourdough rye bread) and connecting with beautiful beings...

茶禪村
一首牧歌隱退在巖
茶道

SEVEN LESSONS FROM A CHA DAO RETREAT

茶道禪修的七堂課

At the time of this writing, I have been back home in Australia for six months. Since my return, I have been cultivating a daily tea practice and have just started serving bowl tea to family and friends. I still have many more quest(ion)s and the forces that got me a spot in Big Sur will forever be a mystery. However, I know that whenever I sit on my cushion, take a deep breath and start boiling the water, a calmness washes over me and it feels like a homecoming every time.

Many of Wu De's words come back to me often, in waves of remembrance or in moments of recognition when I am with Tea. It is of course impossible to remember everything that Wu De said at Esalen, but these are the seven lingering lessons that stuck:

I. Find your gifts and give them away for free. Time, food, tea, service, money, possessions, teachings, love—the key to living forever is to give it away. The alternative is having it taken from you. Find what you're here to master and learn with the intention of passing it on. Cultivate a giving heart and don't withhold your gifts—your joy is the world's joy.

“The more he gathers, the more he loses.” —Wu De, paraphrasing the *Dao De Jing*

II. Everything we build is a sandcastle. The security that you think holds you isn't real. Take the leap. You won't find stability and assurance in a world that offers none. It all continues to flow, and only you have the power to determine how you orient yourself to the current. It would be wise not to be against it.

“Letting go is the essence of spiritual practices.” —Wu De

III. Your orientation to the issue is the issue. A favorite of mine. Whatever you are resisting goes on persisting. It continues to show up again and again for you to learn the lesson. I love how Wu De says that the issue isn't the issue, it's how you're approaching and orienting to it—that is the issue. That's what keeps you stuck, or angry, or unable to turn suffering into self-healing and wisdom.

“Turn all obstacles into offerings, and all offerings into dharmas.” —Wu De

IV. There is only yes or no, and all maybes are no. Holler! At some subconscious level, I think we all know that your first instinct is usually the truth of the matter. Ego and narrative usually get in the way of clear decision-making. This is telling us to trust our deep knowingness (or intuition) as right. “I'm not sure” is a no, and as you grow, your maybes get smaller because your yeses get bigger.

“Trust someone who has made more mistakes and walked further.” —Wu De

V. All mistakes are tuition. This thing we call Earth school can sometimes throw some real doozies at us. See all mistakes as “tuition.” If you learn, it's not a mistake—it's a lesson. Bring mindfulness to the mud and mine the gems out of all your experiences.

“A good sign of spiritual progress is spontaneity.” —Wu De

VI. Don't seek too hard; let the right thing find you. A manifesto for trust and flow, particularly useful when it comes to finding your life's purpose or even romance. Sometimes in these situations, the best thing to do is nothing, since in frantic searching for the right thing, you might miss the magic of the present moment. I enjoy it most when Wu De peppers his dharma talks with matters of the heart like, “choose the person who chooses you” (I'm holding out for a future book on love and relationships).

“If you believe in tea, it doesn't need to be explained; if you don't believe, no amount of explanation will do.” —Wu De

VII. There is nothing you can add to this moment to increase it. Often, we want to hang on to an experience, preserve it, or extend it so it never ends. We have a delusion that we can own something. I often think about how Wu De says that you can't possibly have this moment any more than you are having it right now! Embrace *ichigo ichie* and marvel that we even have this moment now to just drink tea and be.

“Buying a tea is like buying a ticket for a friend to come and see you.” —Wu De



Afterwards

During the retreat, I had been eyeing one of Wu De's tea-dyed pieces of artwork at the back of the hall—a simple kettle boiling on a white background. I bought it and afterwards asked Wu De what the characters mean. He answered with a knowing glint in his eye, “Tea drinks people.” At the time, I had no clue what he was talking about, but I carried it home with me and it now sits in my tea space. I glance back at it often, contemplating those three words. I think I now know more about what it means:

Tea wants to be human.

She wants to be sentient.

So she drinks us.

It takes a long time to get to know someone well, Tea included. As Mary Oliver says, to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work. Tea is alluring and astonishing; She is full of

love and spirit, a quiet reverence and wonder. A conduit for service, introspection, self-inquiry, sharing and joy. Tea speaks to us. She is heart medicine. A transmission of wisdom. The more I notice, the more obvious it is to me:

We drink tea to bring Her ancient teachings into this world. Tea becomes you...

In a live broadcast at the end of June, I asked Wu De: how do you know when a teacher is *your* teacher? He said, “Finding your teacher is like falling in love; it's karmic. You *know* it when you have found it.” It took five years, a very long wait list, synchronicity and a whole lot of alignment, but it was all worth it to finally get here. Meeting Tea began a new way of life. I could never have imagined that one of the true loves of my life would be a leaf, but now I cannot imagine it being any other way.

It is true—make space for something in your life and it will come. This is not a spiritual bumper sticker. What is meant for you will be sent to you and everything will work out, though maybe not as you expect it to. The unknown knows more than you.

An unexpected invitation and a visceral *yes* back in the snowy high desert of New Mexico was perhaps the soul of Tea saying to me, “*come this way.*” Honoring and following that spontaneous feeling was one of the most transformative and enriching decisions I have ever made. Tea is now a daily anchor, a constant teacher and an intimate companion with continuous deepening dialogue that delights the intellect, incites the sacred and nourishes my soul to no end. She is more than anyone could hope for in a lifelong friend.





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