

In conversation with  
Shoshana Cooper  
& Lesley Maclean

# 茶 THE ART OF JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY

INTRODUCTION BY RABBI DAVID COOPER

Tea is one of the few meditations that requires more than one person. There's the server and the guests, and it is a profound spiritual path for both. When a person is learning tea, he or she is learning how to develop an environment that invites people into a space that enhances quiet and peacefulness and a sense of serenity and interconnectedness. This includes the room itself, the cleaning of the room, and the selection of the various items used in the ceremony.

There's an art to choosing and preparing the implements, which are very carefully selected to relate to the season and the environment one is in. You balance yin and yang, selecting a round something with a square something, or a dark something with a light something, or a leaning something with a straight something. You do all of this balancing so that the set-up you have in the room is itself a moving art form, not to speak of the flower arrangement which is an art in and of itself, and the scroll on the wall which is also an art in and of itself.

So even before the guest walks into the room, the preparation is a major part of what it means to serve tea. Then the server performs a whole series of ritual movements that are very inviting, that settle the mind and open one up to a different state of consciousness. This is quite subtle, including the way you hold your hand, the position it points, and the roundness of your movements—so serving tea is a dancing art as well.

When someone enters the room, even if it's their first time experiencing tea, and even though they may not notice all the different aspects of the whole environment, there's a mood present that is designed to induce a contemplative state of mind. The experience of tea raises the senses of the person being served to notice, say, the shape of the wisp of the steam as it comes out of the pot. Thus, it is also a kinetic art in many different ways, throughout the whole experience. It is a beautiful, contemplative practice.

**WHJ:** What does the creative process have to do with the art of tea ceremony, if anything?

**LESLEY:** The creative process has to do with creation—bringing into form. We talk a lot in tea about the relationship of form to the essence of tea, and how through form something is created. So the creative process is actually a profound part of tea, but it's not necessarily about waving a paintbrush around or doing funky things with tea utensils, but more to do with that very act of bringing the formless into form.

**SHOSHANA:** Implicit in what you're saying is the assumption of an "I" creating something.

**WHJ:** Often it's said that true creativity is what comes through when the "I" is out of the



**Shoshana Cooper** HAS STUDIED CHANOYU FOR ALMOST 25 YEARS, AND HAS BEEN TEACHING IT FOR 15 YEARS. SHE ALSO PRACTICES AND TEACHES JEWISH MEDITATION.



**Lesley Maclean**, ART DIRECTOR OF WILD HEART JOURNAL, HAS STUDIED TEA FOR 14 YEARS AND HAS BEEN TEACHING IT FOR 9 YEARS.

way—a distinction is made between self-expression with a small “s,” and allowing expression of the formless Being to move unimpeded.

**SHOSHANA:** So the creative process would be the constant stripping away of that which obscures a very pure, natural arising, one that doesn’t have anything added to it. And tea is completely that, and only that. Because in the beginning you’re learning a form, and you may have ideas of how to create, and artistic ideas, and things you’ve learned and things you want to express, and a lot of it is real self-oriented, and the more form you get the more stilted you feel—you kind of feel stuck in it. Then you get used to the form, and somehow creativity starts to arise within the container of the form more and more over time.

**LESLEY:** And yet here’s my small self coming to tea with all my ideas and my fancies, and that’s going on at the same time. There’s this mundane level and this very profound level, and they’re happening simultaneously. Because I certainly bring my personality into tea, as do we all. So there’s an esoteric tea, but there’s also this marvelous playing with things and people.

**SHOSHANA:** When it gets down to the nitty-gritty like that, that’s where the real creativity starts to come, because there’s no sense of esoteric or philosophy—you just drop all of that, you take everything that you know and you start to interact. From the minute I even think about inviting you to tea, to the full creation of that experience and the post-experience as well, it just infuses my whole life—I pull from everything I know.

**LESLEY:** And then I come along to tea as a guest, and that meeting is a complete unknown. It’s not just that you created it and I sit there and say, “Oh that’s very good Shoshana.” We’re meeting together and something is created that isn’t under either of our control, that’s partly about the effort you’ve put into it, and partly about the effort I’ve put into it, partly about our relationship, and also about the time it occurs. You go to a lot of effort and physical work in tea, for the tiniest things. You spend hours, and if your guest isn’t very receptive, they might come and say “Oh yes, very nice, nice cup of tea, ciao.” And they didn’t realize that you’ve been scrubbing the mats, and arranging the flowers—one of the rules for arranging flowers is “to arrange flowers by foot,” meaning you go for a long walk and find your flower. You didn’t just plunk it in the vase.

**SHOSHANA:** People equate it with dinner parties, and it is somewhat equivalent, if you’re a really good host or hostess. But the beauty of tea ceremony is you’ve been trained to think about the people who are coming. We’re not generally trained that way—some people

>>>

## RAKU & THE MAKING OF TEA BOWLS

RAKU WARE HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE TEA CEREMONY SINCE ITS ORIGIN IN 16TH CENTURY JAPAN, BECAUSE OF ITS ABILITY TO EXPRESS THE

SIMPLE, THE RUSTIC AND THE UNPRETENTIOUS. WILD HEART JOURNAL ASKED NORA SAFRAN, LONGTIME ZEN PRACTITIONER AND ACCOMPLISHED POTTER, TO SPEAK ABOUT RAKU AND THE MAKING OF TEA BOWLS:



“Raku is a firing technique—the pots are put into a red-hot kiln. When the glaze melts, they are taken out still glowing and placed in a closed can with sawdust or dry leaves. Every other kind of firing starts with pots in a cold kiln, they heat up with the kiln, and they are taken out when the kiln is cool. Raku is a much quicker process that’s very exciting and produces great stress. The ware often has dark markings from the burning leaves, but they are not considered defects. It’s all about controlled imperfections—you’re looking for the happy accident. Or the unhappy accident—your glaze isn’t quite dry, the pot is damp, you put it into a hot kiln and it explodes in two minutes! It’s a very risky operation.

“When you serve ordinary morning tea in the zendo, first things first, there’s a bowl on the altar and you pour tea for the Buddha. When I first started, the Zen Master had asked me to make him a really nice bowl for the Buddha’s tea. At that time I was working on a wheel, and I made about 30 bowls before I had one I liked enough to bring to him.

>>>



Working on the wheel is a great meditative activity—but I usually don't like the results. What comes out often looks too mechanical for my tastes. I'm into the hands-on look, and I call making pots by hand 'the silent art,' because working on the wheel will always be accompanied by sounds and rumblings. So making them by hand is more meditative in that respect. But many things can be a meditative activity, so that's not quite why I consider this a spiritual practice.

"It's rather that I have feelings about clay itself—that it is a perfect metaphor for what is called in Buddhism *shunyata*—emptiness. Empty of all concepts that we impose. Clay is especially wonderful in that regard. It's basically nothing. Nothing but mud you get on your feet. It's basically worthless until we impose our visions upon it. It is without form and void. And then the miracles that can come of it—everything from adobe houses to nose cones on rockets to tea bowls.

"I was teaching a ceramics workshop at a monastery once, and I had my students critique their own pots. I told them, 'Bring your pot, and have it sit before you, and pretend you're the Zen Master, and the pot is the student, and look at it and see if it's lying. Ask yourself if it is a true gesture and if it comes from the heart.' That is my criteria for a good pot—is it a true gesture and does it come from the heart?"

might naturally do it, but someone else might give a dinner party and be ticked all day that there are all these people coming and they're sorry they invited them, and that's the energy that's going into it. But for me the way I do a dinner party comes from tea, from choosing the menu to cleaning up afterward.

**WHJ:** When you spoke about bringing your mundane self to the tea ceremony, is part of the purpose of engaging in the ceremony to transcend or move through your mundane self into another place?

**LESLEY:** Well, that implies that the mundane is somehow separate from the profound, and that you go from this state and everything becomes more rarefied. Whereas what it teaches me is that *in* the mundane is the profound. Often people think of tea ceremony as "just serving a cup of tea," and I like that—it's just serving a cup of tea. So it's just that, and not this grand religious ceremony that we put all our baggage on, but it's just absolutely, basically, a cup of tea! Sometimes tea is incredibly humdrum and plain, and somehow I've learned that that's not separate from the sacred.

**SHOSHANA:** All of us who do tea have acclimated ourselves to using ritual to express something—the mundane and the sacred. Because we do it so frequently, the same ceremony over and over and over again—every mood and every experience has flown through the ritual. And so elsewhere in life, in a moment of great consternation, when something is being created, a tea person innately knows how to use ritual. It becomes second nature to use ritual to be able to create extraordinary

sacredness out of the most mundane affairs, when it's appropriate. That's what comes when you just do something like serve a bowl of tea, everyday, through thick and thin—sometimes it's spectacular and sometimes it's mundane.

**LESLEY:** A huge part of it is the repetition—it is a practice. You can see it once and it's very exotic and mannered if you're not Japanese. And so quite possibly my attraction to it might be that it's quaintly or intriguingly foreign, and it's away from my culture of origin. And certainly there's also an aesthetic about it that's appealing in terms of its minimalism, and a sense of balance. When I learned tea I had to first go through this whole thing of its exotic quality and learn that language, and then struggle with the language. And like in any culture, there are parts that I love and parts that I struggle with, the shadow side of it. But it's through this constant repetition that slowly hidden meanings are revealed. So the ideal tea is with people who have been doing tea for awhile.





Even though someone who doesn't know tea can come in and have a wonderful experience, ideally it's kind of a shared language that you all play with and there's something indefinable that connects it all.

**SHOSHANA:** There's a non-verbal experience that happens in the tearoom when you're with other tea people, regardless of whether they're beginners or advanced. You become so vulnerable when you're with others who know tea and you get past "that's right and that's wrong" and you just watch the person do what they're doing and you see them in a way that would never have that intimacy of experience if you were simply being social with them. There's a way you know them that is completely unique, by just having them serve you a bowl of tea, and in receiving that bowl of tea they get to know you as well.

So it's a language, a way of meeting people, that is beyond words. It's such a rewarding experience, and it's sometimes frightening how intimate it is. You can see it in the most skilled practitioners—they're so aware of the intimacy, the biggest pro in the world will still shake. And I think it's the shock of being *allowed* to be that intimate because it's so uncommon in the world—we're so used to protecting ourselves. When you sit and serve somebody a cup of tea or receive it, you can't hide...and so it's a little scary...every single time.

**LESLEY:** So it's a kind of art of intimacy, and the form is the vehicle by which you can let go of your personality part—it's like taking off the clothing of your personality and just being there naked with other people. The form has that function. And the Japanese are a culture that have used form in that way. When you study tea, you study it in a very mechanical way quite often—you move your right arm here, and you move your left here, and it's extremely hard to not just see that aspect of it, but it's through that you can then just let it go, and you don't have to ask, "Oh who shall I be now?" And then you actually have the chance of experiencing something beyond "Oh here I am, Lesley, blah blah blah."

**SHOSHANA:** The "what to do" is given, but then the Being just pours out within that in a way that I find remarkable.

**WHJ:** I know that both of you do spiritual practices and meditation—are they distinct from your tea practice, or do you consider tea also part of your spiritual path.

**LESLEY:** They're not distinct at all—I would do meditation to help me do tea, and tea has informed my meditation practices. Part of my desire to meditate is to develop an ability to let go of my personality a little more, to concentrate more deeply, because I bring my chattering mind into tea and it can sometimes get in the way. But tea also has a function for me that's not specifically

spiritual as well—it's certainly a wonderful way to hang out with people, and also engage in my love of visual arts. But more and more I realize tea absolutely pervades my spiritual life, or how I see things—it's not merely integral to my life, it is my life.

**WHJ:** From the outside, it looks like when you're doing tea that it is a meditation.

**LESLEY:** It is a meditation, but it is simultaneously focused and expanded, taking in what's happening around me and focusing in. If I'm doing tea and thinking "Oh I'm such a great person" or "Oh God I'm terrible," it becomes absolutely transparent in my tea. But somehow the act of giving and receiving makes things a little more generous—I don't tend to beat up on myself quite so much when I do tea.

**SHOSHANA:** A lot of my spiritual practice involves long-term intensive retreats, and oftentimes I don't wish to continue practicing in such an intense way after the retreat is over, because it's often very jarring for me to go into deep meditative states and then come back into the world. I've always had difficulty coming in and out and integrating all that. It always feels like "this is my meditative life, and this is my regular working life." But tea, though, and this is now for 20 years, has always been my daily practice. Because it has a concentrated focused element, and yet since I usually serve somebody each day, it gets me out of a self-orientation, so it's very closely related to living in the world—there's no gap like there is between sitting in a meditative space and going really deep and then trying to drive down a mountain.

So it has become my daily practice because it is so completely integrated in the world. It isn't about altered mental states. There *are* slightly altered mental states that occur in communing with other people, but they're not the kind of wacky things that happen in retreats. So much of spirituality is often sitting and trying to enlighten myself—even though the obvious intent of that is to diminish the sense of self—but it puts so much focus on the self, the unraveling of all the psychological pieces that come in, whereas tea is one of the few practices that I have found where you can't do that. It's not about yourself. It's about serving it to somebody else.

**LESLEY:** You're always giving it away.

**SHOSHANA:** It's refreshing in a world where most meditative practice is about "me and my practice." You can't say that about tea.

**LESLEY:** And then when you're finished, you pack it all up and the room is empty again. That's so great—learning to appreciate the transient... when I do tea and there's that meeting, there's such a wonderful, precious feeling, but when it ends and the guests go, as Rikyu talks about, there is only "being alone in the room with your

kettle" and that's all, and there's just this exquisite sadness, and to me that's part of the beauty of tea also.

**SHOSHANA:** I've just been studying koans with Zen teacher Bernie Glassman, and he said that you pass a koan after you just exhaust yourself trying. You give everything you have to it over and over again until you have nothing left, and that's when you go into the Master and pass the koan. And I realized, "I know what you're talking about..."—it's that moment in the tearoom, listening to the boiling water, there's no "I" left, you have given it all out, the body is exhausted, the mind is exhausted, but there's a happiness, a sadness, it is beyond description, and that is the moment of passing a koan. But I didn't tell him that I knew, or how I knew. But maybe that's how I'll pass my koan, by giving him a chaji (formal tea gathering).

**WHJ:** There seems to be an analogy between tea ceremony and music: in jazz, you learn chords, or the harmonic structure, you learn the scales that go with the chords, and then there's a piece of music that has a particular progression of chords, and you have to get all that down first, and then within that there's plenty of room for improvisation. On the other hand, in classical music, it's note for note for note—you're trying to read it exactly as it is. And what a great classical musician brings is the interpretation and feeling of who they are, even though the notes are not improvised. So I'm thinking that tea is more analogous to that type of music, because you have a particular form that you don't deviate from...

**LESLEY:** The thing is, you do deviate, but in the traditional aesthetic of tea, the deviations are very subtle. Since tea trains you to have a subtle receptivity to all your senses, in tea you don't necessarily bring a whole wild jazz band into the room, but you might just tweak the form a little bit, and because everyone is feeling so sensitive, it's like "WOW!!" and all you've done is turn something just slightly differently. The effect is as if you're wildly improvising, like in Japanese Noh theater where one step might refer to a whole journey around the world.

**SHOSHANA:** Our friend Krista was saying that it's like a string quartet playing chamber music. They're all really experienced, they all know the music, they all deeply love the music, and they sit down in a small space and they're just looking at each other and playing with each other. So the form is there, but sometimes you have a good performance, and sometimes it defies description because of the love and the intimacy of it. And I think that would describe a really profound tea ceremony, because it's usually a small number of people, and everybody's aware of the form, but there's this whole dynamic that is occurring so far outside of the form. If you were going to register that, it would be as open and free as a jazz

improvisation—it's just on a much subtler level—you just wouldn't see it from outside. But if you yourself as an audience knew the music, you would know when you had heard an incredible concert—you would just know. On the other hand, I've seen tea work for my students where I would hardly call it classical music—I would call it punk rock—so I wouldn't limit it.

**LESLEY:** The tea you describe from the point of view of the participant is different than that of an impartial observer. It absolutely requires participation in order to experience the true creativity of it, which is an internal experience. And yet it's very beautiful from the outside, as you look at all the arts that have evolved via the tea ceremony—ceramics, wood-working, lacquer-ware. Tea has been pivotal in the Japanese arts: architecture, gardens, tatami mats, windows in houses—tea was absolutely central to all of that. The outer forms are so beautiful, but part of their beauty is what has informed them.

**WHJ:** When one goes on a meditation retreat, on some level there's this notion that you're doing these practices to move from here to there. You bring who you are and where your consciousness is, and you're adding these practices on, thinking that something's going to occur. There's a sense of progression and getting somewhere, which might be an illusion, but that is there. Do you

bring that kind of motivation to the tea ceremony also, that you're trying to get somewhere, and if so, where?

**SHOSHANA:** I guess the only motivation I bring is I want to serve a good cup of tea. I don't think there's a sense of getting anywhere. Because then you have hopes and expectations, and you've already burned through those to know that they never turn out. They'll still arise, but at this stage it's like I don't bother, I'll just wait and see what it is. There's excitement, but I don't have a sense of getting somewhere by doing a tea ceremony. *Learning* tea as a practice has more of that sense. It's what somebody has said, "The goal of tea is to become a splendid person." I love that. A splendid person, no more, no less, in every aspect of life. It's just loving something and doing something you love—there's no other reason that I do tea, other than that I love it. Because it's not popular. It doesn't raise your status in the community to say that you're a tea drinker. It usually lowers it. It's not easy to explain. So you're not doing it for anything you're getting from external feedback. Your families think you're crazy...you can only do it through love, you're not doing it to get anything. And you don't really care. Yet the end result is, of course, you do see that you become a more refined person, a more caring person—a splendid person!



**For more information about studying tea in USA or other countries email: [lmaclean@xtra.co.nz](mailto:lmaclean@xtra.co.nz)**