

Flowers, Tea & Poetry

Isn't it strange how sometimes there are things we know we know, things we think we know we don't know, things we really don't know yet, and yet there are things we don't know we know but we do know them all the same?

In a time and place long from here, there was once a well-respected Samurai who had three sons. He was well respected because of his mastery of the 'Katana' - the traditional long-bladed sword that only Samurai-born men have the birthright to carry. His fame was such that men, young and old, new to the ways of the world, or with a wealth of experience already within them, would come from even the farthest reaches of the land to learn at the feet of this master, and would go away changed forever.

The sword-master had three sons, each healthy, strong and intelligent. The two eldest loved nothing better than to watch their father teach and practice with his sword and, when their time came, to learn from him. In time, they also became known for their mastery of the katana blade. The youngest was different. Although the clash of swords and the vigour of the exercise and the spectacle of whirling blades flashing in the morning sun intrigued him, what intrigued him more was the focus of attention, the lost-in-the-moment-ness of the combatants expressions, their precision of posture and breathing, and the grace with which the sword-master's movements flowed one into the next. He was intrigued by the purpose of swordplay and combat - to create space, to protect freedom, and ultimately to preserve one's own life and, if necessary, end the life of the adversary. He was intrigued by the world in which he lived and its richness in colour, sound, texture, taste and smell.

And so it was that he focussed on these aspects of life, spending time with the family gardener learning about the seasons, the cycle of life and death, the flowers and herbs, and developed a gift for 'Ikebana' - flower-arranging. He would often be seen walking from the gardens or the open countryside back to the house carrying large bundles of flowers and grasses. When he arrived home, he would carefully select the flowers that seemed right in that moment, setting aside the rest and, seemingly without effort, would create exquisite arrangements, sometime with only two or three flowers, and sometimes with many more. He spent time with his mother and learned from her to prepare and serve tea in the time-honoured way - the 'Chanoyu' - and developed all the mental disciplines that are required to fully understand 'Chado' - the Way of Tea. And he spent time with his teachers, learning about the history of his nation, about politics, literature, and many other things. He also developed a gift for poetry - 'Haiku' - capturing the essence of a single moment in a stanza of only seventeen syllables, concise and yet loaded with imagery and meaning.

Although his father encouraged him when he felt he could, he could not help harbouring a secret disappointment that his youngest son would never be a warrior like his two older brothers, following in his footsteps and continuing the family traditions and legacy.

Time passed, as it has a habit of doing, and the three sons grew. The two eldest sons became Samurai warriors like their father before them, and often returned after long absences to tell tales of heroism in battle, of conquest and political intrigue, and their father was openly proud of them. The youngest son however, followed a somewhat different path.

In a town a few hours journey from where he grew up, the youngest son, after serving his apprenticeship, had bought a tea house. Over the years, his tea house developed such a reputation that people, young and old, new to the ways of the world, or with a wealth of experience already within them, would come from even the farthest reaches of the land to experience the Chanoyu, and would go away changed forever. They spoke of his exquisite flower arrangements, sometime with only two or three flowers, and sometimes with many more. They spoke of the wonderful haiku parchments adorning the walls of the tea-rooms, and they spoke of the grace and tranquillity of the tea ceremonies he performed, how he seemed almost lost in the

moment, focussing his attention on each part of the ceremony, and of the grace with which his movements flowed one into the next. They called him The Tea Master.

Early one afternoon, a band of 'ronin' - renegades and mercenaries - rode into the town square and headed for his tea house. From the steps of the 'Sukiya' the Tea Master watched them approach, but was sure not to let his trepidation show on his face. As he invited them in, they pushed roughly past him and into the tea house, where they began to be raucous and demanded saki and women, despite the fact that it was obvious this was a tea house and not a place one might find saki in the quantities they were demanding or women that would be willing to associate with them. The Tea Master was indignant that they should be so ungracious as to disturb the 'Wa' - the harmony - of his tea house, so he politely asked them to leave. The leader of the gang was incensed at this and, turning to the Tea Master, demanded that he meet him at sunrise the next day in the town square, with his sword, for a duel to the death. Knowing what a dishonour it would be not to accept, the Tea Master agreed, with a trace of dread in his voice. The ronin left, with the leader secretly relishing the prospect of seeing the meek Tea Master quake in fear and beg for his life before he killed him.

The Tea Master left the tea house in the care of his staff and went home. There he took his swords from a large chest in his room, carefully unwrapping them from the sheet in which they were bound. He slid them into his belt, the katana, and the shorter 'wakizashi' - as the son of a Samurai, it was his birthright to wear the two swords - and went to the stables, saddled his horse and rode out of the town to his father's house a few hours away.

His father was pleased to see him, and also surprised to see him wearing his swords, as despite it being his birthright, he had never been inclined to wear them before. After the usual pleasantries had been exchanged, the son explained to his father what had happened, and told him of the duel he was to fight at sunrise the next day. His request was simple - "Teach me to fight, Father". His father breathed a heavy sigh and spoke, "My son, I cannot teach you in a few hours what it took me, and your two brothers, so many years to master. While we were practising our swordplay, you were arranging flowers, or making tea, or writing poetry. Let me see you draw your sword." The son did as his father asked and, with shaking hands, tried to draw his blade from its 'Saya' - the scabbard. After several clumsy attempts to withdraw the blade, it finally came free and he stood, trembling, with sword raised in front of him. His father's face spoke many things as he watched - sorrow, disappointment, and fear for his son. "Tomorrow, when you draw your sword to fight, it will be your last act on earth," came his father's reply. The son awkwardly put his sword away and turned to leave. "My son," his father spoke, placing a hand on his son's shoulder, "I have heard much of the reputation of your tea house, but I have never had the honour of taking tea with you. Since you are to die tomorrow, would you prepare and serve tea for me before you leave?" At this, his son's heart lightened, and he went to his horse and retrieved his tea caddy, for a Tea Master is always ready to prepare and serve tea wherever they are.

He returned to the room in which his father sat and placed the caddy carefully on the floor, and on top a single flower he had picked from the garden outside. He stood for just a moment, and took in the room, and, it seemed to his father, almost becoming one with his surroundings. Removing his coat, he folded it neatly, as he had done so many times before, and placed it in the corner of the room. He laid his two swords on top, perfectly balanced. He took the flower and placed it in a simple vase from his caddy, and set it in an alcove in the wall. Then he began the tea ceremony, building a small fire on which to heat the water, fetching the water from the garden well, ladling it into the kettle and setting it over the coals to heat. He took the tea container from his caddy and, after cleaning the spoon with a carefully folded silk napkin, placed just the right amount of tea in the bowl. When the time was right, he took the water from the fire and poured just the right amount over the waiting leaves and then quickly

whisked the brew into a perfect froth. At the right moment, when the tea had reached the perfect colour, he turned the bowl and offered it to his father to drink from. His father was transfixed and, for a moment, did not see the bowl being offered to him, for the trembling son he had seen leave to fetch his tea caddy was no longer there. Instead, in front of him was the Tea Master he had heard so much about, back straight, poised and balanced, movements gracefully flowing from one into the next, lost in the moment, as if each single second was to be appreciated and absorbed, pure 'Mushin' – literally 'mind-without-thinking'. The father snapped out of his momentary trance, and accepted the tea. He inhaled the aroma and sipped, and realised that this was in fact probably the best tea he had ever tasted. He returned the bowl to his son, who also drank and, after the customary appreciative silence, the father spoke. "My son," he said, "all your life I have been secretly disappointed that you did not follow in my footsteps as your two brothers did, for I thought you did not understand the Samurai way. Now I have seen for myself that you are more a master of the way you have chosen than I am of mine. Tomorrow, when you meet your challenger, do so as if you are serving tea." The son looked perplexed, but the father continued, "Take a moment to become one with your surroundings, as you have done here. Remove your coat and fold it neatly and lay your short sword on top, as you have done here. Move as gracefully as you have moved here, and when you reach your chosen spot, remain as perfectly balanced as you have here, lost in the moment, in mushin, just as you have done here. And when you draw your blade, do so as if serving tea, with the grace and precision with which you offered me the bowl, and position yourself and your sword between heaven and earth as carefully as you have positioned so many a flower in your arrangements. Then, even before your opponent strikes, accept your fear, accept death in that moment, and you will be ready to defend yourself when the first blow comes."

The son bowed low, and thanked his father for his wisdom. As he later rode home, he felt a calmness and peace about the following morning, and that night slept peacefully.

The Tea Master began the next day like any other, rising before the sun and readying himself as he had done so many times before. He dressed and picked up his swords and put them in his belt, and then collected his tea caddy and left for the town square. As the first rays of the sun crept over the horizon, he arrived to find the band of ronin waiting on the steps of the tea house. A small crowd had gathered at a respectful distance, in huddles in the streets off the square, and on the verandas of the buildings around. The Tea Master took a breath and centred himself as he always did when preparing to serve tea. He surveyed the square and chose the spot that seemed in that moment to be the best for the occasion, and set his caddy down a few feet away. The ronin jeered, and their leader shouted, "Do you intend to defeat me by serving me tea?!". The challenger jumped down from the tea house steps, casting his coat aside, and drew his sword from its battered scabbard. The Tea Master did not notice, being already lost in mushin. He removed his coat and folded it neatly, placing it on top of the tea caddy, and carefully lay his short sword on top. He plucked a small flower that was growing from the dirt nearby and, after momentarily appreciating its transient beauty and form, spoke a Haiku to the flower in a voice that, though quiet, floated around the square in the light morning breeze. No record exists of the words he spoke, but it is said that the men that heard it gasped at their power, and many of the women who heard it swooned at their passion. But the Tea Master remained lost in the moment.

He took a small silk napkin from the sleeve of his kimono and carefully laid the flower on it, folded it neatly around the flower and placed it within the folds of his kimono. Moving gracefully to his chosen spot, he bowed courteously to his challenger. All this had not gone unnoticed by the ronin leader, or the rest of his band of renegades, or the crowd. Remembering his father's advice, the Tea Master straightened from the bow, stood, centred himself and, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword, drew it from its scabbard with the same care and precision with which he had offered the tea bowl countless times before. The sword sang from its sheath and flashed bright in the early-morning sun as it sliced a perfect arc through the air. The note reverberated around the square and, when all was still and quiet, the

Tea Master stood, sword raised, poised between heaven and earth, and ready. The challenger took a tentative step forward and raised his sword, and then noticed the expression on the Tea Master's face. Gone was the fear he had seen when he had made his challenge the previous day. In its place was a calm acceptance, an acceptance of that which the challenger himself feared most – death.

The challenger hesitated, and then, instead of attacking, bowed low and, placing his sword on the ground before him, withdrew a few paces and spoke in humbled tones without rising from his bow; "I cannot defeat you, for you do not seek life or death in conflict, only to accept the experience of the moment. I see you are not only a master of Chado, but a master of the sword also. I beg your forgiveness and humbly ask that you spare my life." "Young man," said the Tea Master, "you should not judge by appearances, as you did yesterday in challenging me, and as you did today in surrendering to me. Not everything is as it seems. Now go, and learn from this." The ronin leader backed away slowly, perhaps expecting the death-blow still to come before he was out of reach of the Tea Master's blade. At a safe distance he turned and rejoined his fellow ronin, who then mounted their horses and rode out of town into the hills.

The Tea Master lowered and sheathed his blade. He walked over to where he had left his caddy, picked up his short sword and put on his coat, tucking the swords into his belt. Then, lifting his tea caddy, he walked across the square, bending to pick up the ronin's sword on the way. The crowd followed in silence at a respectful distance until the Tea Master entered his tea house and slid the door shut behind him. Near the back of the crowd, it is said, stood a very proud Samurai sword master and two awe-struck sons. It is said that he was heard to say to his sons, "I hope you have learned today that there is more to mastery of the sword than mere mastery of the sword."

An hour or so later, the tea house opened for business at its usual time and, perhaps not surprisingly, was busier than ever. In the alcove in the entrance hall now hung the ronin's sword, still without its scabbard, and near it was a small flower laid carefully on a silk napkin. Beside them on a small piece of parchment was a freshly written haiku:

"Fearing fear each day
We die; embrace fear once and
Every moment live."

That night, it is said, under cover of darkness, a clean-shaven and freshly-bathed young man, bearing more than a passing resemblance to the Tea Master's challenger that day, arrived on the steps of the tea house, humbly requesting to be allowed the honour of being the Tea Master's apprentice.

And so it was that the Tea Master's fame grew even more in the months that followed, so much so that the tea house and gardens expanded and the Tea Master started a school to teach those who were willing to learn the arts of ikebana, chado and haiku; flowers, tea and poetry. And people, young and old, new to the ways of the world, or with a wealth of experience already within them, would come from even the farthest reaches of the land to experience the Chanoyu, and would go away changed forever. They spoke of his exquisite flower arrangements, sometime with only two or three flowers, and sometimes with many more. They spoke of the wonderful haiku parchments adorning the walls of the tea-rooms, and they spoke of the grace and tranquillity of the tea ceremonies he performed, how he seemed almost lost in the moment, focussing his attention on each part of the ceremony, and of the grace with which his movements flowed one into the next. And they spoke in hushed tones of the day he won a duel just by drawing his sword.

Now, over the entrance to the tea house hangs this motto:

"Have the courage to accept that you do not know all that wish you knew, to let go of all that you think you know, and to lose yourself in all that you know you know. And then draw your sword."