

Sources of Japanese Tradition

SECOND EDITION

VOLUME 1

INTRODUCTION TO ASIAN CIVILIZATIONS

DRINK TEA AND PROLONG LIFE

From its earliest use in China, tea was appreciated probably above all for its medicinal value, and the tradition of tea as good “medicine” accompanied the beverage on its transmission to Japan in the early Heian period (although, as noted, the Heian courtiers also very much esteemed tea as a feature of Chinese higher culture). When the Zen monk Yōsai reintroduced tea to Japan in the late twelfth century, at the beginning of the medieval age, he did so primarily to promote good health. Referring to “these degenerate times” (i.e., the age of *mappō*), Yōsai observed that “man has gradually declined and grown weaker, so that his four bodily components and five organs have degenerated.” Of the five organs, the heart is “sovereign”: its condition determines the well-being of all the organs. And because the heart craves the bitter taste found in tea, drinking it will “put the heart in order and dispel all illness.” Drinking tea, a stimulant, was also an excellent means for Zen monks and others to fight drowsiness during meditation. Still another use for tea was as a cure for hangover, as Yōsai publicly demonstrated during a visit to Kamakura, when he provided relief for the shogun Sanetomo the morning after one of Sanetomo’s frequent drinking bouts.

Tea is the most wonderful medicine for nourishing one’s health; it is the secret of long life. On the hillsides it grows up as the spirit of the soil. Those who pick and use it are certain to attain a great age. India and China both value it highly, and in the past our country too once showed a great liking for tea. Now as then it possesses the same rare qualities, and we should make wider use of it.

In the past, it is said, man was coeval with Heaven, but in recent times man has gradually declined and grown weaker, so that his four bodily components and five organs have degenerated. For this reason even when acupuncture and moxa cautery are resorted to, the results are often fatal, and treatment at hot springs fails to have any effect. So those who are given to these methods of treatment will become steadily weaker until death overtakes them, a prospect which can only be dreaded. If these traditional methods of healing are employed without any modification on patients today, scarcely any relief can be expected.

Of all the things which Heaven has created, man is the most noble. To preserve one’s life so as to make the most of one’s allotted span is prudent and proper [considering the high value of human life]. The basis of preserving life is the cultivation of health, and the secret of health lies in the well-being of the five organs. Among these five the heart is sovereign, and to build up the heart the drinking of tea is the finest method. When the heart is weak, the other organs all suffer. It is more than two thousand years since the illustrious healer Jīva passed away in India, and in these latter degenerate days there is none who

can accurately diagnose the circulation of the blood. It is more than three thousand years since the Chinese healer Shennong disappeared from the earth, and there is no one today who can prescribe medicines properly. With no one to consult in such matters, illness, disease, trouble, and danger follow one another in endless succession. If a mistake is made in the method of healing, such as moxa cautery, great harm may be done. Someone has told me that as medicine is practiced today, damage is often done to the heart because the drugs used are not appropriate to the disease. Moxa cautery often brings untimely death because the pulse is in conflict with the moxa. I consider it advisable, therefore, to reveal the latest methods of healing as I have become acquainted with them in China. Accordingly I present two general approaches to the understanding of diseases prevalent in these degenerate times, hoping that they may be of benefit to others in the future.

I. Harmonious Functioning of the Five Organs

According to the esoteric scripture known as the Conquest of Hell the liver likes acid foods, the lungs pungent foods, the heart bitter ones, the spleen sweet, and the kidney salty. It also correlates them with the five phases and five directions as follows:

<i>Organ</i>	<i>Direction</i>	<i>Season</i>	<i>Element</i>	<i>Color</i>	<i>Spirits</i>	<i>Sensory Organs</i>
Liver	East	Spring	Wood	Blue	Soul	Eyes
Lungs	West	Autumn	Metal	White	Soul	Nose
Heart	South	Summer	Fire	Red	Spirit (<i>shin</i>)	Tongue
Spleen	Center	Between Seasons	Earth	Yellow	Will	Mouth
Kidney	North	Winter	Water	Black	Imagination	Ears

Thus the five organs have their own taste preferences. If one of these preferences is favored too much, the corresponding organ will get too strong and oppress the others, resulting in illness. Now acid, pungent, sweet, and salty foods are eaten in great quantity, but not bitter foods. Yet when the heart becomes sick, all organs and tastes are affected. Then eat as one may, one will have to vomit and stop eating. But if one drinks tea, the heart will be strengthened and freed from illness. It is well to know that when the heart is ailing, the skin has a poor color, a sign that life is ebbing away. I wonder why the Japanese do not care for bitter things. In the great country of China they drink tea, as a result of which there is no heart trouble and people live long lives. Our country is full of sickly looking, skinny persons, and this is simply because we do not drink tea. Whenever one is in poor spirits, one should drink tea. This will put the heart in order and dispel all illness. When the heart is vigorous, then even if other organs are ailing, no great pain will be felt.

Then follows a section explaining how the five organs correlate with the various Buddhas, symbols, gestures, and regions of the esoteric mandalas (see chapters 7 and 8), together with the esoteric secrets of healing disorders in each.

In regard to the Five Tastes: acid foods include oranges, lemons, and other citrus fruits; pungent foods include onions, garlic, and peppers; sweets include sugar, etc. (all foods are sweet by nature); bitter foods include tea, herb teas, etc.; salty foods include salt, etc.

The heart is the sovereign of the five organs, tea is the chief of bitter foods, and bitter is the chief of the tastes. For this reason the heart loves bitter things, and when it is doing well all the other organs are properly regulated. If one has eye trouble, something is wrong with the liver, and acid medicine will cure it. If one has ear trouble, something is wrong with the kidney, and salty medicine will cure it. [And so forth, running through the preceding table of correspondences.] When, however, the whole body feels weak, devitalized, and depressed, it is a sign that the heart is ailing. Drink lots of tea, and one's energy and spirits will be restored to full strength.

[*Kissa yōjōki*, pp. 899–901; PV]