



The Japanese tea ceremony is influenced by Zen Buddhism and promotes humility and serenity.

## Not Just a Cup of Tea

SADO, THE TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY, IS ABOUT SLOWING DOWN AND SAVOURING THE MOMENT

By CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

For the first time in my life, I'm petrified by the prospect of having tea. I'm at Koomon salon in Tokyo's Chuo-ku neighbourhood, to watch a traditional tea ceremony called *sado* or *chado* (meaning 'the tea way of life'). As my hostess shuffles into the room on her knees, everything I've read about how formal the Japanese are comes to mind and I'm hesitant to walk in. But Yukiko-san, who has been running the salon for 18 years, instantly makes me feel welcome.

As anyone who has seen the *sado* in films knows, the ceremony is filled with elaborate gestures. To some, it may seem overly formal and pointless. But in a world where small courtesies have been forgotten, and there's little time to stand and stare, each gesture is a reminder to slow down and be grateful for what you have. "The ceremony

helps you to keenly experience the small things in your daily life, using all your senses," Yukiko-san explains.

Koomon, the salon's name, refers to a house without a fence—in other words, a free spirit without material attachments. To help us get into that Zen spirit, we're told to sit in front of an alcove and admire the calligraphy mat on the wall and a pot with a single flower, both chosen to reflect the hot, rainy season. The calligraphy means, "May the clouds clear and the blue mountains be visible." The clouds are a metaphor for worries and troubles. This hidden layer of meaning is very Japanese. As I discovered, everything in the country has deeper significance that one understands only gradually. Then, I'm told to bow low, the first of several times during the ceremony that I have to perform the gesture, meant to

symbolically remove any vestiges of ego.

Yukiko-san begins making the *matcha*, (green tea) with practised ease. On the table, she places a small plate with white sweet cubes called *himuro*, the old name for the storage room for ice. Made of sugar, gelatin, seaweed and red bean paste, they look like ice cubes—another nod to the summer.

I begin to relax and give in to the experience. Thoughts of the recent crowded metro journey and the hectic sightseeing schedule ahead recede. I start to understand the *sado* concept of *ichigo ichie*: 'one encounter, one life'. Life is transient and the same moment will never come again, so both host and guest are enjoined to keep their minds focused on the present.

In the ceremony, everything needs to be perfect. Yukiko-san cleans the bowl with a brush, a purification ritual for both the dish and the mind. She slides the mat up to offer me, the guest of honour, the first cup. Before I drink, I look to my guide and say "*osaki ni*", seeking her permission to drink first. Then I receive the bowl, saying "*ita daki mas*", meaning "I take it with appreciation." They're pleased I can repeat the Japanese phrases easily. I want to explain that for someone who's grown up saying words like *vyazhakizhamai* (Thursday in Tamil) this wasn't a challenge.

I hold the bowl and turn it clockwise a bit so that I do not drink from the front, which has the most decoration. This is another declaration of my humility. As I finish, I say "*gochi so sama*" to my hostess, thanking her.

Made from powder and hot water, the green tea tastes like broth. When I tell Yukiko-san it's "interesting", she bursts into laughter. Perhaps she's heard that polite response several times before.

The ceremony isn't over. Before putting the bowl down I admire it, since many are family heirlooms. The oldest cup, which has the simplest design unchanged for over five centuries, is given to the guest of honour.

Over time, the rituals of *sado* have been integrated into daily life. The Koomon is not just for travellers, but also Japanese like Hiromichi Mourase, an architect in his forties, who is here for his weekly tea-making class which keeps him connected with his traditions. It may seem excessive to suggest that a tea ceremony can be a spiritual experience, but the Japanese have made it that. They believe that the ceremony is about harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity—and really, aren't those sentiments we can all do with? ■