KAKUZŌ OKAKURA

THE BOOK OF TEA

The Art of Doing One Thing at a Time



Annotated edition · notes and essays by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

The Book of Tea, Annotated

KAKUZŌ OKAKURA

The Book of Tea, Annotated

The Art of Doing One Thing at a Time

With notes and essays by

JULIAN DELPHIKI



Thinking School

The Book of Tea by Kakuzō Okakura was first published in New York in 1906 by Fox, Duffield & Company. The original text is in the public domain.

Notes, preface, context, essays, counterpoints and epilogue © Julian Delphiki, 2026.

Published by Thinking School.

All rights reserved in the original material of this edition. No part of it may be reproduced without written permission, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Okakura's text follows the Project Gutenberg edition (EBook #769) with four emendations listed in the Note on This Edition.

Contents

PREFACE · One Thing 1

CONTEXT · A Japanese Man in Boston 5

PART ONE · The Book of Tea, *by Kakuzō Okakura*

CHAPTER I · The Cup of Humanity 11

CHAPTER II · The Schools of Tea 19

CHAPTER III · Taoism and Zennism 27

CHAPTER IV · The Tea-Room 37

CHAPTER V · Art Appreciation 47

CHAPTER VI · Flowers 53

CHAPTER VII · Tea-Masters 63

PART TWO · *Essays*

ESSAY 1 · Two Pieces of Music at Once 69
ESSAY 2 · Forty-Seven Seconds 77
ESSAY 3 · The Abode of Vacancy 85
ESSAY 4 · The Archer and the Prize 93
ESSAY 5 · What Is Left Unsaid 101
ESSAY 6 · Sweeping a Clean Path 107
ESSAY 7 · A Threshold 113
ESSAY 8 · A Single Morning Glory 121
ESSAY 9 · We Classify Too Much 127
ESSAY 10 · Flow and Its Twin 133
ESSAY 11 · Host and Guest 139
ESSAY 12 · Outsourced Multitasking 147
ESSAY 13 · One Square Inch of Silence 155
ESSAY 14 · A Bowl for Years 161
ESSAY 15 · Boardroom Zen 167

PART THREE · *Counterpoints and Epilogue*

Counterpoints 175
EPILOGUE · Options, No Promises 181
Further Reading 185
Sources and References 187
Note on This Edition 195
About the Author 197
Also by Julian Delphiki 199

PREFACE

One Thing

It is likely that whoever is reading these lines has a phone face down somewhere nearby, an email tab open somewhere, or the suspicion that, while they read, someone is writing them something urgent. I do not say this as a reproach. I say it because a book about doing one thing at a time ought to begin by admitting that almost nobody manages it. Nor is it a book about getting more done: for Okakura, attention was a way of understanding, not of producing.

For years I have kept my highlights: more than eight thousand lines from some seven hundred books, almost all of them short. About four hundred and fifty carry a label I gave them myself, Zen. This book comes out of that drawer of other people's sentences, which kept filling up without anyone asking it to.

In 1906 a forty-three-year-old Japanese man working for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston published, in New York, a small book in English about tea. His name was Okakura Kakuzō and he wrote for a specific audience: Boston society, the people of salons and collections of Asian art. The book was short, ornate, ironic and quite angry.

In chapter IV, while explaining why the tea-room is almost empty, he writes a sentence that does not pretend to be important: "One cannot listen to different pieces of music at the same time, a real comprehension of the beautiful being possible only through concentration upon some central motive." For his

readers it was a truism. For us it is almost a provocation. This book grows out of that sentence.

And out of an experiment that went the wrong way round. Once, looking for a productivity boost, I tried focusing very sharply on a single thing. I did get more done. What I had not expected was the rest: I enjoyed it more, and I came out with a clearer head. I went looking for productivity and found something else, which is more or less what Okakura had been saying for a century.

Why this text

The Book of Tea is one of the most widely read Japanese texts outside Japan. It comes in gift editions, pocket editions and free editions. It is quoted in home-décor stores and wellness feeds. It is nearly always quoted by halves: the pretty line about imperfection survives and everything else disappears.

Everything else is the interesting part. Okakura does not write a manual of calm. He writes about war: he complains that the West began calling Japan civilized only once Japan began to commit "wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields". He writes about the taste of the crowd, about collectors who accumulate without looking and about flowers cut to decorate banquets. And he writes about a tea master ordered to kill himself by a despot who had admired him. And beneath all of it, he is talking about one thing: how we pay attention.

The tea-room, as he describes it, is a device for doing one thing. It is reached by a path "intended to break connection with the outside world." One enters bent over, through a small door, without one's sword. Inside there is a single work of art, chosen for the occasion, and everything else has been removed so as not to compete with it. Nothing sounds but the boiling water. And for a while host and guests do nothing but make tea and drink it.

Read today, chapter IV sounds like the description of a lost technology. Not because we lack rooms or kettles, but because we lack almost everything else: the path, the door, the empty room, the silence, the occasion. Our days have few doors and many windows, and nearly all of them are open at once.

That route has four moments, which this book will call doors: going in, staying, finishing and leaving. Each essay is marked with its own.

I say this from the inside. For more than twenty years I have earned my living in digital commerce, a trade that consists largely of getting someone to stop what they are doing and look at something else. I have measured clicks and conversions, and I have explained in class how to get them. I cannot pose as a victim of the attention economy. I have worked for it too.

What this edition contains

First, Okakura's complete text in the original English of 1906, with new notes where a reader today would get lost: Chinese names in old spellings, half-quoted poems, dates the author rounds off.

Then fifteen essays. Each starts from a specific passage of the book and sets it against something of our time. The first three deal with multitasking, interruptions and boredom. The next ones deal with the temptation to control the result, with works that leave room for the viewer, with craft and knowing when a job is done, and with the thresholds that separate one thing from another. Then come abundance, metrics, absorption that empties us and attention to another person. And, at the end, the promise that others will do things for us, the noise we did not choose and the objects we never come to know. The last deals with the business that has grown up around Eastern wisdom, this book included.

They are not lessons. Okakura did not give lessons either. They are attempts to read attentively a text about attention without turning it into a method. Each essay quotes the passage it starts from, keeps what Okakura says apart from what I think, and includes at least one serious objection. Sources for the facts and for other people's ideas are at the end of the book, essay by essay.

At the end there is also a section of counterpoints, with the strongest objections to Okakura and to me, and an epilogue with a few concrete options and no promises.

The book allows other orders. Readers who come for attention and are short of time can read Okakura's chapter IV and then essays 1, 2, 7 and 12. Readers who come for tea and aesthetics, Okakura's chapters and essays 5, 6, 8

and 14. Readers who distrust books of Eastern wisdom would do well to start with essay 15 and the counterpoints, which is where this book distrusts itself.

And readers who want to try something today have an experiment that costs one day: count how many times you pick up the phone before it rings. Essay 2 explains why the result usually surprises.

I once wrote, half joking, that in the short term we lend attention and in the long term we end up paying. I still think so. In Spanish, attention is lent; in English, it is paid. This book is an attempt to find out which of the two we are doing.

A warning

This is not a productivity book. It does not aim to make the reader do more, or do it faster, or perform better at work. If that happens, it is a side effect for which I take no responsibility. Okakura did not defend concentration because it was efficient but because it was the only way to understand anything. His argument was aesthetic, not about performance: a piece of music half heard is not half a piece; it is something else.

Nor is it a book against technology. It was written on a computer, with studies consulted online and with the tools at hand. What interests me is not throwing the phone away but knowing who decides when I look at it.

And one last warning, in case anyone bought it for the title: Okakura never talks about multitasking, notifications or productivity. He talks about tea. The connections are mine and I sign them. If any seems forced, the reader has the passage right there to check.

CONTEXT

A Japanese Man in Boston

The author

Okakura Kakuzō was born in Yokohama on February 14, 1863, in the last years of Tokugawa Japan's isolation. His father, a former samurai of the Fukui domain, ran a trading house in the port that had just opened to foreigners. The boy grew up among Western merchants and learned English before many of his teachers did. He also studied the Chinese classics and ink painting.

At seventeen he graduated in the first class of Tokyo University. He soon worked with the American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa on inventories of temple treasures, at a time when the Meiji government was dismantling Buddhism and old art was being sold by the pound.

In 1887 he was among the founders of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, and soon its director. He was pushed out in 1898 after internal intrigues, and that same year he and his students founded the Nihon Bijutsuin, the Japan Art Institute, which still exists.

His résumé was therefore unusual: a defender of Japanese tradition who wrote better English than most of his English readers, and a cultural official who ended up outside the system he had helped to build.

Three books in English

Between 1903 and 1906 Okakura published three books, all in English and none in Japanese.

The Ideals of the East (London, 1903) opens with a sentence that would have a long and crooked life: "Asia is one." *The Awakening of Japan* (New York, 1904) explains Japan's modernization to Americans. *The Book of Tea* (New York, Fox, Duffield & Company, May 1906) is the shortest and the only one still read outside university departments.

All three share a purpose: to explain Asia to the West in the West's own words. It is worth remembering while reading. *The Book of Tea* is not a Japanese treatise in translation; it is a plea written directly for American readers. When Okakura says "we", he means the Japanese; when he says "you", he means whoever is holding the book.

Boston, 1906

From 1904 Okakura worked for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which held one of the finest collections of Japanese art outside Japan. In 1910 he became curator of its Department of Chinese and Japanese Art.

In Boston he found a patron: Isabella Stewart Gardner, collector, millionaire and owner of a rebuilt Venetian palace in the Fenway. According to the museum that bears her name, Okakura presided there over a candlelit tea ceremony and gave her a copy of his newly published book. Publishers' tradition, repeated on almost every jacket, says the text was written to be read aloud in her salon.

The book therefore has a very particular audience: rich, cultivated people, fond of things Japanese and fairly sure of their own superiority. Okakura flatters and needles them in equal measure. He tells them their drawing rooms have turned into museums, that they throw flowers on the dung heap and that they judge pictures by the signature. He says it so elegantly that they applauded.

The war in the background

The first chapter should be read knowing what had just happened. Between February 1904 and September 1905, Japan and Russia fought over Manchuria and Korea. Japan won. It was the first time in the modern era that an Asian power had defeated a European one in a full-scale war, and within months the Western press swung from contempt to admiration for the "samurai spirit".

Okakura writes at that moment. That is why the book opens with a bitter complaint, that the West respects Japan only when it kills, and why it offers tea, as the "Art of Life", against the fashionable *bushidō*. It is a pacifist gesture and a gesture of national pride. Both at once.

What happened next

Okakura fell ill in early 1913, left Boston and went home. He died on September 2 that year at his mountain house in Akakura, Niigata Prefecture. He was fifty. Isabella Stewart Gardner held a memorial service at her Boston palace on October 20 and handed out copies of *The Book of Tea* to those who came.

The book went on without him. Muraoka Hiroshi's Japanese translation appeared in March 1929 in the Iwanami Bunko pocket series, and only then did a wide Japanese public read it; that edition is still in print. There is an irony in Japanese readers having to read, in translation, an explanation of their own culture written for foreigners.

His other famous sentence, "Asia is one", fared worse. In the 1930s and 1940s Japanese militarist ideology appropriated it as propaganda for the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". The critic Takeuchi Yoshimi recalled that a patriotic anthology of the time chose that very sentence for December 8, the day the Pacific war began. Okakura had been dead for decades and cannot answer for it, but he cannot be read as if it never happened either.

In the West, *The Book of Tea* became a minor classic, described in the encyclopedias as the earliest lucid English-language account of Zen and its relation to the arts. Poets, architects and designers read it. Today it is read mostly by people looking for calm, and quoted mostly by people selling furniture.

What Okakura simplifies

Okakura was not a historian of tea in the strict sense, and it sometimes shows. He rounds off dates, mixes legend with chronicle and credits his heroes with things later research doubts; the notes flag these one by one. Rikyū's death, which ends the book, he tells as stage tragedy: the real reasons for Hideyoshi's order are still unknown.

Nor is he neutral. He idealizes Japan, simplifies China ("the latter-day Chinese" who has lost the meaning of life) and treats the West with an irony that is sometimes fair and sometimes payback. Reading him well means reading both: the sensibility and the plea.

PART ONE

The Book of Tea, by Kakuzō Okakura

CHAPTER I

The Cup of Humanity

Tea began as a medicine and grew into a beverage. In China, in the eighth century, it entered the realm of poetry as one of the polite amusements. The fifteenth century saw Japan ennoble it into a religion of aestheticism–Teaism[1]. Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.

The Philosophy of Tea is not mere aestheticism in the ordinary acceptance of the term, for it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe. It represents the true spirit of Eastern democracy by making all its votaries aristocrats in taste.

1. *Teaism* is Okakura's coinage, modelled on *Taoism*. No Japanese term corresponds to it exactly; the nearest are *chadō* or *sadō* (the Way of Tea) and *chanoyu* (literally "hot water for tea"), the usual name for the tea gathering.

The long isolation of Japan from the rest of the world, so conducive to introspection, has been highly favourable to the development of Teaism. Our home and habits, costume and cuisine, porcelain, lacquer, painting–our very literature–all have been subject to its influence. No student of Japanese culture could ever ignore its presence. It has permeated the elegance of noble boudoirs, and entered the abode of the humble. Our peasants have learned to arrange flowers, our meanest labourer to offer his salutation to the rocks and waters. In our common parlance we speak of the man "with no tea" in him, when he is insusceptible to the serio-comic interests of the personal drama. Again we stigmatise the untamed aesthete who, regardless of the mundane tragedy, runs riot in the springtide of emancipated emotions, as one "with too much tea" in him.

The outsider may indeed wonder at this seeming much ado about nothing. What a tempest in a tea-cup! he will say. But when we consider how small after all the cup of human enjoyment is, how soon overflowed with tears, how easily drained to the dregs in our quenchless thirst for infinity, we shall not blame ourselves for making so much of the tea-cup. Mankind has done worse. In the worship of Bacchus, we have sacrificed too freely; and we have even transfigured the gory image of Mars. Why not consecrate ourselves to the queen of the Camelias[2], and revel in the warm stream of sympathy that flows from her altar? In the liquid amber within the ivory-porcelain, the initiated may touch the sweet reticence of Confucius, the piquancy of Laotse, and the ethereal aroma of Sakyamuni himself[3].

Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in others. The average Westerner, in his sleek complacency, will see in the tea ceremony but another instance of the thousand and one oddities which constitute the quaintness and childishness of the East to him. He was wont to regard Japan as barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace: he calls her civilised since she began to commit

2. The tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, is a camellia. The phrase probably nods to Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*.

3. Shakyamuni, "sage of the Shakya clan": the historical Buddha. Okakura uses the romanisations current in 1906 English (*Laotse*, *Sakyamuni*). The Note on This Edition gives modern equivalents.

wholesale slaughter on Manchurian battlefields[4]. Much comment has been given lately to the Code of the Samurai,–the Art of Death which makes our soldiers exult in self-sacrifice; but scarcely any attention has been drawn to Teaism, which represents so much of our Art of Life. Fain would we remain barbarians, if our claim to civilisation were to be based on the gruesome glory of war. Fain would we await the time when due respect shall be paid to our art and ideals.

When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East? We Asiatics are often appalled by the curious web of facts and fancies which has been woven concerning us. We are pictured as living on the perfume of the lotus, if not on mice and cockroaches. It is either impotent fanaticism or else abject voluptuousness. Indian spirituality has been derided as ignorance, Chinese sobriety as stupidity, Japanese patriotism as the result of fatalism. It has been said that we are less sensible to pain and wounds on account of the callousness of our nervous organisation!

Why not amuse yourselves at our expense? Asia returns the compliment. There would be further food for merriment if you were to know all that we have imagined and written about you. All the glamour of the perspective is there, all the unconscious homage of wonder, all the silent resentment of the new and undefined. You have been loaded with virtues too refined to be envied, and accused of crimes too picturesque to be condemned. Our writers in the past–the wise men who knew–informed us that you had bushy tails somewhere hidden in your garments, and often dined off a fricassee of newborn babes! Nay, we had something worse against you: we used to think you the most impracticable people on the earth, for you were said to preach what you never practiced.

Such misconceptions are fast vanishing amongst us. Commerce has forced the European tongues on many an Eastern port. Asiatic youths are flocking to Western colleges for the equipment of modern education. Our insight does not penetrate your culture deeply, but at least we are willing to learn.

4. Okakura is writing months after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), fought largely in Manchuria. Japan's victory set off a wave of Western enthusiasm for the "samurai spirit", which this paragraph answers.

Some of my compatriots have adopted too much of your customs and too much of your etiquette, in the delusion that the acquisition of stiff collars and tall silk hats comprised the attainment of your civilisation. Pathetic and deplorable as such affectations are, they evince our willingness to approach the West on our knees. Unfortunately the Western attitude is unfavourable to the understanding of the East. The Christian missionary goes to impart, but not to receive. Your information is based on the meagre translations of our immense literature, if not on the unreliable anecdotes of passing travellers. It is rarely that the chivalrous pen of a Lafcadio Hearn or that of the author of "The Web of Indian Life"[5] enlivens the Oriental darkness with the torch of our own sentiments.

Perhaps I betray my own ignorance of the Tea Cult by being so outspoken. Its very spirit of politeness exacts that you say what you are expected to say, and no more. But I am not to be a polite Teaist. So much harm has been done already by the mutual misunderstanding of the New World and the Old, that one need not apologise for contributing his tithe to the furtherance of a better understanding. The beginning of the twentieth century would have been spared the spectacle of sanguinary warfare if Russia had condescended to know Japan better[6]. What dire consequences to humanity lie in the contemptuous ignoring of Eastern problems! European imperialism, which does not disdain to raise the absurd cry of the Yellow Peril, fails to realise that Asia may also awaken to the cruel sense of the White Disaster. You may laugh at us for having "too much tea," but may we not suspect that you of the West have "no tea" in your constitution?

Let us stop the continents from hurling epigrams at each other, and be sadder if not wiser by the mutual gain of half a hemisphere. We have developed along different lines, but there is no reason why one should not supplement the other. You have gained expansion at the cost of restlessness; we have created

---

5. Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), the Greek-Irish writer who settled in Japan and explained it to Western readers. *The Web of Indian Life* (1904) is by Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble, 1867-1911), the Irish disciple of Vivekananda. She was Okakura's friend and helped edit his *Ideals of the East*.

6. The Russo-Japanese War again. The "Yellow Peril" that follows is the phrase popularised in the 1890s, notably by Kaiser Wilhelm II; Okakura answers it with his own "White Disaster".