

THE SPELLBINDING ZEN SPIRIT OF THE JAPANESE *SENCHA* TEA CEREMONY IN KYOTO



Ute Sawada from Germany is a *senchado* associate tea master. She takes pains to entertain her guests with grace and accommodation, always keeping their comfort in mind.

Captivated by the spirit of senchado—a tea practice with roots in Zen Buddhism—a German woman living in Kyoto is now an active teacher of chado/sado, the “way of tea.” Through the practice of tea, she hopes to communicate ichigo ichie (one lifetime, one meeting), the essential spirit of Japanese hospitality, to the world.

At a tea ceremony class located near Kyoto’s Kamo River, Ute Sawada, a *jun-shihan* (associate tea master) of the Obaku Baisa school of *senchado*, or *sencha* tea ceremony, demonstrates one of several methods to serve green leaf tea. Amid the distinguished atmosphere of the tearoom, she performs a series of skillful, dignified movements to pour green tea into a tea bowl filled with ice, making a sweet, fragrant *gyokuro* brew—a high-quality green tea rich in umami, cultivated by shading the leaves from sunlight while young and tender—perfect for soothing her guests’ thirst in the summer.

There are two variants of *chado*, or the “way of tea,” in Japan. While the more widely known *chanoyu* involves whipping powdered green tea with hot water, *senchado* uses loose green tea leaves steeped

in a small teapot. This practice dates back to the latter half of the 17th century, when Chinese Zen master Yinyuan Longqi, who founded the Obaku school—one of Japan’s

three major Zen schools—introduced Chinese-style tea to Japan.

Later, in the 18th century, a monk of the Obaku school with the Buddhist name Gekkaï Gensho, more familiarly known as Baisao (Old Tea Seller), further popularized this form of tea by selling it on the streets of Kyoto and setting up casual tea stands, making it accessible to the general populace. The free-spiritedness of Baisao’s tea struck a contrast with the formalized rituals of *chanoyu* in a way that pleased the culturati of the day and opened the way to the establishment of *senchado*.

Today, there are many styles of *senchado* in Japan, each with its own method. Sawada’s Obaku Baisa style uses a table and chairs to make the tea ceremony more accessible and enjoyable for those with injured or delicate joints or for foreign guests.

Sawada hails from the German state of Lower Saxony, and her encounter with *senchado* was mostly a matter of chance. She first became interested in Japan by watching anime shows on TV, such as *Detective Conan*, as a child. That sparked a more general interest in Japanese daily life and aspects of its culture, such as hot springs and Shinto shrines. In

In contrast to *chanoyu*, which uses powdered tea, *senchado* uses loose tea leaves.



Left: Sawada’s tea school uses a table and chairs, making tea more accessible to those who have difficulty sitting in *seiza*, the Japanese formal sitting posture. The photo was taken at the culture festival held at Manpuku-ji Temple in 2021. Right: Sawada says she has never been good at appearing in front of people, but at a tea ceremony, her nerves magically dissipate and her mind becomes tranquil. The photo shows her at a tea ceremony at Kamigamo Jinja Shrine in 2019.

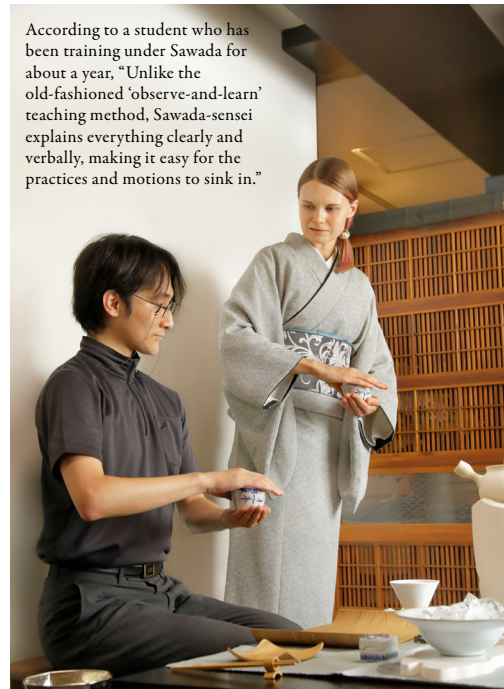


2014, while a student at the University of Cologne, she fulfilled her long-held dream of going to Japan, attending a study course at a college in Kyoto. “I had heard about Japanese *omotenashi* before I came to Japan, but the hospitality I encountered was so much more than I ever imagined,” she said with a smile.

With her quiet demeanor, Sawada found herself more at home in the reserved nature of Japan than in her debate-loving homeland. In 2017, after going back to Cologne to finish her college degree, she returned to Japan. Through a connection of her husband’s, she was introduced to a *shihan* (tea master) of the Obaku Baisa school of *senchado*, who invited her to experience a tea ceremony. Sawada was moved by her first taste of *gyokuro*.

“I was fascinated by the smooth, elegant efficiency of motions in preparing the tea, and by the careful effort spent to make a cup of tea just for me. The philosophy of creating a connection with another person through the hospitality of *ichigo ichie* (one lifetime, one meeting) resonated deeply with me,” she recounted.

According to a student who has been training under Sawada for about a year, “Unlike the old-fashioned ‘observe-and-learn’ teaching method, Sawada-sensei explains everything clearly and verbally, making it easy for the practices and motions to sink in.”



Sawada was so captivated by *senchado* that she immediately became a disciple of the Obaku Baisa school. In the fall of 2018, she performed her first tea ceremony in public at a tea gathering held at Manpuku-ji, the head temple of the Obaku school.

“At first, I was extremely nervous, but as I began the ceremony the process focused me and I felt a deep sense of calm. The preparation of tea is often considered a dynamic form of Zen, a type of meditation in motion that leads to a state of mental ‘emptiness,” she explained. Sawada continued to train and was eventually certified as an associate tea master in 2021, permitting her to open her own classroom. She currently leads tea classes on an irregular basis, while also offering travelers and short-term visitors to Japan the chance to experience *senchado*. She once gave lessons to a retailer of Japanese tea in Germany who reached out to her via social media, and has performed the tea ceremony for a delegation of lawmakers from her home country.

When Sawada explains *senchado* to foreign visitors, she is careful not to force it into the framework of their particular language or culture. She said, “For example, there are precise names in Japanese for the utensils used in preparing the tea, and each has a distinctive meaning. Just translating the name of every vessel as a ‘teapot’ would take away from the spirit of *senchado*. That is why I clearly state the Japanese name of each utensil and carefully explain its meaning.”

It takes roughly six years to become a fully certified *shihan*, but once Sawada does, she will pour her energies into a form of international cooperation that will share the appeal of *senchado* with the world. This fall, she is set to participate as a host at the Obaku Baisa school culture festival held at Manpuku-ji Temple in Kyoto’s Uji City. With this, another promising ambassador of Japanese culture is poised to make her mark on the world at large. ●