

The Zen of Cuban Coffee

Dozens of "The Zen of _____" books are available today. From The Zen of Cats to The Zen of Wooden Kayak Building, if it exists, then you can Zen it. Cuban coffee is no exception. The Japanese Green Tea Ceremony (JGTC), a ritual that Buddhist monks developed centuries ago, was the original Zen of Tea. Today in Japan, the practice has settled into a social event for the upper classes, and consequently, it has lost much of its spiritual usefulness. The Cuban Coffee Ceremony (CCC) is loosely based on the JGTC and, as a discipline, can stimulate you spiritually.

In practice, Zen uses the conservative approach of following procedure step by step. To the strictly Western mind, this makes the CCC look like an exercise in anal retention: it has too many prescribed steps for an otherwise simple task. However, from an Eastern perspective, this discipline can have spiritual value: it can wake you up in many ways.

The CCC has three functions. Most obvious is to make a cup of coffee. The second is less obvious — for its health benefit. The third function is Zenish: it trains the practitioner to focus experientially on the Now.

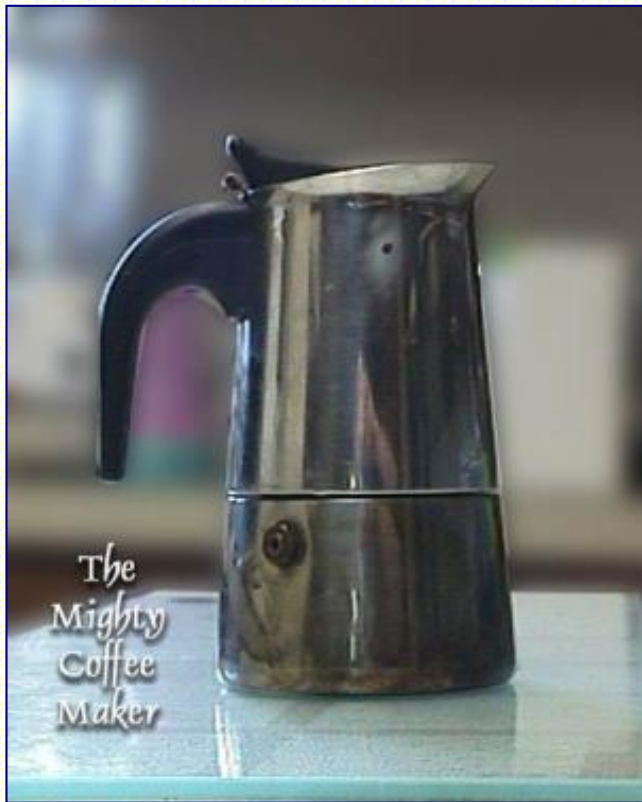
I've divided the Ceremony into three parts: Tools and Ingredients, the Procedure, and the Zen of Cuban Coffee. After that comes Afterthoughts and Post Notes on Zen. Here we go!

Tools and Ingredients

Like all ceremonies, you will need tools. This section lists what you will need. You can ad lib with them first if you want, but then settle into a regular pattern. For details on health benefits, I've provided footnotes and links.

Here's what you will need:

- Cuban Coffee: Use finely ground, almost powdered Jamaican beans, or buy a pre-ground brand, like Cafe' La Llave, Cafe' Pilon, Bustelo, or some other Spanish-named brand. I've experimented with Turkish coffee and found it to taste a little smoother. After opening the package, store the coffee in the freezer in an airtight container. Unlike tea, which lasts forever, coffee will go stale in a few weeks.
- An Espresso Maker: You can buy a two-cup stainless steel model for under \$20. Avoid those made of aluminum.
- Espresso (demitasse) Coffee Cups: Use a demitasse cup for style - or be square, mon.



- Water: Spring or bottled water is usually best, unless you are OK with tap water.
- Xylitol: This is the sweetener. See the footnote on this amazing product. Stevia is OK too, but it's not as beneficial as xylitol. Use sugar as a last resort, but avoid aspartame (marketed as 'NutraSweet,' 'Equal,' and 'Spoonful').

- **Chocomine:** This new and allegedly improved form of chocolate is good for you! As alternatives, use unsweetened chocolate, cocoa, or carob. Note that the addition of chocolate technically rules out this drink as authentic Cuban coffee. Other factors, like not using 30% sugar, eliminate it as well.
- **Note:** a recent study by the National Institute of Statistical Studies has shown that a few people may "not like chocolate." However, the authors were quick to point out that in the real world this may not be true.
- **A Teaspoon:** You need a small spoon for stirring.
- **Cream:** Use organic cream if possible. It tastes better, and it lacks the antibiotics and hormones that pollute most commercial brands. If you want to be decadent, use heavy whipping cream. ("What! Is he crazy?") Soy works too, but the fat in cream helps protect the stomach from the acidity of the coffee.
- **A Special Storage Area:** Store all items together, except the refrigerated coffee and cream. You can use a plain kitchen shelf, but if you want to, you can decorate it. Always keep it clean and tidy, and treat it with respect.
- **The Counter:** This is the area where you prepare the coffee. Whether you use a kitchen counter or a table, treat this space as a sacred ceremonial area. Honor it, and keep it clean.

The Procedure

This section describes the mechanics of the practice. You don't need to follow the procedure precisely. If you want to follow it at first, though — to become familiar with it — then that's fine. The point is to establish a pattern and a rhythm that works for you, and then stick with it. It may take several weeks to develop this into a "conscious habit."

One benefit of having a set procedure is that you can use it as a yardstick: the less you follow it — skip steps or do them out of order — the more "spaced out" you are.

The Set Up:

1. Gather all the ingredients and tools, except the cream. Place them on the counter.
2. Pour the water into the ceramic cup. Use whatever amount your

coffee maker recommends.

3. Put the ceramic cup in the microwave and heat it for 1½ minutes or for however long it takes to boil the water. This speeds up the process. Purists can skip this part and boil the water in the coffee pot on the stove. Not using the microwave adds about 5 minutes to the process.
4. While the water is heating, fill the brewing basket with coffee and pack it tightly. When full, set the basket somewhere stable (other than in the coffee base). Put the coffee back in the freezer.
5. By the time you are finished filling the basket, the water should have boiled. Pour it into the base of the coffee pot, and then put the basket into the base. Screw on the collection chamber tightly.
6. Place the coffee maker on the stove and turn the heat to High.



7. While the coffee is brewing, put a tablespoon of xylitol (or however much suits your taste) into the cup and then put the container of xylitol gracefully away. Add ¼ teaspoon of chocomine (or however much suits your taste) in the cup, and then put the chocomine away.
8. When the coffee starts to percolate, turn the heat down to Medium High. This reduces the risk of it boiling over.
9. When the percolating stops, immediately turn off the heat and remove the coffee maker.
10. Pour the coffee into the cup.
11. Set the coffee maker in the sink, and then run some water over and in it. This helps keep the pot from staining.
12. Stir the coffee well to mix the xylitol and chocomine.
13. Take the cream out of the refrigerator and add a little to the coffee. Stir again.
14. Put away the cream.
15. Wash and dry the spoon, and then put it away.
16. Drink the coffee.
17. Wash and dry the cup. Store it with the other tools and ingredients.
18. Wash and dry the coffee pot and then put it away. Note: You can put the coffee grounds around the base of roses or other plants. They love it!
19. Clean the counter.
20. Thank God for allowing you to have those experiences.

That's it: very mundane (except the last step). Now, here's the Zen part.

The Zen of Cuban Coffee

Zen is all about Being Here Now. You don't have to "think outside the envelope." Instead, be aware of the envelope that you are in. So, you are making coffee. Here's another way to experience it.

The ritual begins the moment you start to gather the items. Feel the force you use to open the freezer door. Holding the coffee, notice how cold the container is. Hear the sound that it makes when you set it down — the less clunking, the better. When gathering the other tools and ingredients, watch yourself reach for them. Feel their weight and texture.

Listen to the water as you pour it into the ceramic cup. Notice the reflections on the liquid. Hear the door of the microwave oven open, and feel the pressure it takes to push the buttons.

Smell the coffee as you carefully pack it into the basket. Feel the resistance it offers. Did you spill any? If so, then clean it up right away, because this is a clean-as-you-go operation.



As you remove the ceramic cup from the microwave, watch the stream rise. Pour the water into the base of the coffee maker. The metal heats up quickly as you fill it, so be careful. Turn on the stove, and watch the element or gas glow. As the coffee starts to percolate, smell the aroma. Follow the organic, percolating rhythms.

Scoop the sweetener and flavorings into the cup and observe their textures. Notice the contrasting colors. When you are done, put the containers away. Feel your arm and back muscles stretch as you are doing it.

Feel the heat as you lift the coffee pot from the stove. As you tip the pot, listen to the sound of one pot pouring. Watch the waves of steam rise . . . it smells delicious . . . it calls you.

Pour in the cream and watch the colors swirl. Stir the coffee; the spoon taps the sides of the cup, "Ting! Ting! Ting!" As you wash the spoon, experience the water rushing and the silver sparkling. Feel its smooth surface as you dry it with a soft clean cloth. Consciously set the spoon in its place.

Enjoy the many aspects of drinking the coffee — its flavor, aroma, texture, and its heat on your mouth and throat.

Wash the cup and coffee pot, and enjoy doing this as much as you enjoyed drinking the coffee.

Lastly, if something interrupts you during the ceremony, attend to it, but keep the same frame of mind.

Afterthoughts

You will discover much more than what you have read above: experience is everything, or more accurately, awareness of the experience is everything. Bring the senses back to life!

This practice trains you to live in the Now — not only while making coffee, but in other everyday situations as well. Ideally, the "now awareness" will infiltrate all of your activities.

Much mental suffering is caused by living in either the future or the past — the same place, psychologically. This mental pain is imagined suffering, but it can hurt as much as the physical variety. Living in the Now disassembles much of that. In addition, being present frees you from restrictive, reactionary behavior. Young children live in this space. We can learn from them, because these days, we are often too busy to live.

Some will insist that drinking coffee is detrimental to your health. They may be right, and alternatives exist. I recommend reading the upcoming book, *The Zen of Smoothies*, by Smoothie Master Barry Taistphul. The results will be the same, sans the caffeine.

Lastly, this practice is not meant to treat or diagnose any physical or spiritual illness. No governmental or spiritual agency has evaluated or approved any of this. You are on your own in the company of other reality seekers.

Cheers!

Post Notes on Zen and Now

Is "living in the Now" the purpose of life? That depends on who is defining the purpose of life, of course. Most Western religions would disagree. Materialistically, many schools of psychology would disagree as well. If you choose it as your purpose, though, what would that imply?

At the very least, this perspective grounds you. You are "sensing" what is happening. Yet, this sounds materialistic: you are only focusing on what is in front of you, what your eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue, and astral body (if you will) can register. They receive information from the world and that data races to the brain. The brain then interprets the data and, voilà, your body has created a picture of reality. Where is Spirit in all of this?

Let's add a spiritual dimension. Does your spirit, God, or guides work through you more effectively if you are focusing on what is around you? Our mental, emotional, and physical bodies are less stressed and distorted when we are clear. This clarity allows us to interpret and act on these higher directions more precisely, because the ego is not intruding as much. Even if these directions don't come from spirit but from within our subconscious, being clear still helps.

From another angle, some philosophies mention "seeing what is." When you drop the filters that both past experiences and future expectations have created, then perhaps you really see. At least, you will see more. However, I don't know to what degree we can drop these filters. Some claim that you can live 24/7 without them. This sounds idealistic; having senses and a brain practically guarantees referencing. Besides, as humans we need the ability to reference. For example, without remembering our language, we couldn't understand what anyone was saying — not even our spiritual guides. Even telepathy uses words, although unspoken.



Maybe in moments of mediation or during metaphysical or spiritual revelation we could completely transcend these filters. Whenever we physically talk or mentally think about this state, though, we are referencing. The point, I believe, is to keep ourselves in balance by being present enough to see clearly yet remain functional. Reasonable enough?

Meditation helps to discipline and focus the mind. Meditation on a mantra is a popular way to help focus on the Now. Here's a mantra I use, although almost any will do. The venerable Tea Master Idoh Teksist, who I met at the foot of Mt. Fuji in 1982, shared it with me. Although the translation isn't exact, it's close enough: Pho-ka-snow. "Snow" should rhyme with "cow." In your mind, repeat the phrase rhythmically.

The Now state is one of wonder. Although it takes much conscious effort to achieve and maintain this level of consciousness, I believe that getting there is just the beginning of an even more incredible adventure.