

THE ROAD HOME

This article was written by our very own Dan Smith.

I came to Taiwan in search of tea, and I'm so thankful I did. Back in Oregon, everyone I knew certainly thought of me as the 'tea guy'. I worked in a tea house inside a Suzhou-style Chinese Garden, operated my own tea service for tastings or events and loved nothing more than the chance to share a cup or two. It was obvious to everyone that it was my passion. At that point, I already knew that tea was my path. It had stayed with me for quite a few years, each year bringing new discoveries and knowledge. But it still seemed somewhat far away and hazy, and I knew I could learn much more in China or Taiwan. I was moving along an unlit path grasping at this and that: trying things out, buying tea online (sometimes locally too) and reading books. And through it all, I was drinking tea, and absorbing a little of its medicine. It seemed only natural to everyone that I would move on to Taiwan to learn and experience more. A little familiar with Taiwanese tea culture, I dreamed of high-mountain Oolongs, fine Puerh and Aged Oolongs. The potential was certainly great; the horizon bright, but I had no idea that I would learn so much and find such deep connection here. I would meet my teacher who would guide my way and completely refresh my love for tea.

Taiwanese people have tea in their blood and in their bones. The vast majority of them are from Fujian and have been drinking tea for many generations, whether it be here in Taiwan or back in the Mainland. There are so many tea experts here and there are countless things to be learned from them. However, to my surprise, I started down the Way of Tea, guided by a fellow American whose from a Midwestern town that is actually quite close to where I was born, though both of us moved away long ago. I was introduced to Wu De by our mutual friend and tea brother, Paul, but with little ado. He simply told me with assurance that he was the best person I could get in touch with in Taiwan.

One visit to meet him and the wheels were set in motion. He saw his student and I my teacher. We set no date to start classes but I think we were both rather inspired on that day a few years ago. I was amazed by his collection of tea and teaware, but even more by his approach. He had an intimate familiarity with tea. He didn't want to conceal this, show off that; didn't want to sell me anything, only to

give. A wonderful, big silence filled his tea space. He gave me many cups of tea, a fantastic lunch and his book. I was living in a small town in central Taiwan at that time and was lucky to befriend a fellow American who had been living in Taiwan for years, and whose love of tea was developing slowly over those years. I tried to share my impressions of Wu De and his tea space with him but couldn't quite communicate it. He could see that I was very impressed. I told him he had to come up to Miaoli with me next time. That visit was another great day and we both eagerly agreed to start coming on a weekly basis for tea classes. Shortly after that, Kaiya—the author of last month's article—would join us. The tea center was alive, and it has grown so rapidly since.

We started with water, the Mother of Tea. After our first class, I began using a storage jar, searching out mountain springs and comparing what was available in the stores. It was no great surprise for me to hear that one must give great respect to water in tea brewing. I already knew this, but only abstractly, like one knows a fact in a book. I had experimented with water some in America, but not much further than comparing a few store-bought bottles. I paid attention to temperature and tried not to over-boil. I wasn't looking at what I was storing it in, what I was boiling it in and how I was heating that vessel. I wasn't comparing those waters side by side in a patient manner. So here I was in an environment that places great importance on sensitivity and honing one's abilities. There are so many wonderful teachings that I have learned here, bringing me to two of the basic and most fundamental of the many teachings I've absorbed:

The first is that we need to go down to a tea's level in preparing it. We shouldn't try to manipulate it, make it conform to our schedule or make it perform for us. The Leaf is our greatest teacher and a reminder that we are also part of Great Nature. We need to at least meet it halfway if we are to receive its goodness. Patience, reverence and sensitivity are all necessary in tea preparation, and the basis for a bountiful tea experience. Working on this sensitivity in all things tea requires work and many reminders from your teacher. This work leads to experience and Gong Fu, something you can never learn by reading a book.

The second lesson closest to my heart is that all things are alive and vibrating with their own energy. The materials in all teaware interact with the tea, the preparer and the guests. I was amazed to learn the rather noticeable impact that different types of stoneware and metal can have on tea and water. There can be a magical alchemy in preparing and serving tea for others. We come to know that our bodies are mostly water, and within all that water is empty space vibrating with energy—enlivened with Qi. We then realize that water is extremely sensitive. It is influenced by solid matter, movement, stars, the moon, magnetic fields, music, the weather and perhaps primary in tea preparation, our thoughts and emotions.

Tea had been right before all of my senses day in and day out for years, and yet I was aware of all this only conceptually. Maybe I could have realized some of these insights and explored them more deeply on my own, but I would need many more lifetimes to make such progress. Now with our tea classes, our Center, I had a forum and teacher to direct and guide me.

At the tea center studying with Wu De, I have realized so much more fully how tea is an excellent vehicle for becoming more sensitive and getting in touch with all that's around us; how to slow down and do things right so that your experience is deeper and more fulfilling. I needed a teacher to tell me directly: "Straighten up, pay attention and get to work!"

It is truly great to see our tea center blossoming and growing. I am overjoyed to see that this tradition is finding listening hearts all over the world and hope to share many bowls of tea with all of you during your coming visits to Taiwan.

