

A SELF-COURSE TOWARDS DEEPER TEA

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Whether you have a meditation practice and want to strengthen it, or simply want to set aside a day to go deeper into your tea practice, a one or two-day self-course is a great way to do it, and best of all, you can do it right at home, no matter where you live!

I thought I would let you all in on how I've done mine and what I've learned, in the hopes that you may find inspiration and encouragement to make a course of your own. The advantages of a self-course are obvious, in that you are the one setting all the boundaries. You get to make the schedule. You can tailor the 'rules'. And you can include special tools and aspects of your own inner work.

On the other hand, if you want to sleep until 9am, pop into the refrigerator for an unscheduled evening snack, check your email, or just quit altogether and turn on the TV, it's all sitting right there before you. And if someone gets it into their head that they want to come and bug you, well there isn't a fence or guards at the door to stop them. Hopefully, this article will help to guide you towards making the most of a one or two-day tea and meditation course.

Let's start off with the schedule I used most recently:

Schedule

4am	Wake up, shower, stretch, etc.
4:30-5:00	Matcha/whisked tea
5:00-6:30	Meditation
6:30-8:00	Breakfast
8:00-10:00	Tea (bowl)
10:00-11:00	Meditation
11:00-1:00	Lunch, rest
1:00-3:00	Meditate
3:00-6:00	Tea (gongfu)
6:00-7:00	Meditate
7:00-8:00	Spiritual reading/audio discourse
8:00-9:00	Final meditation

First of all, yes, 4am! It's great. Everything is so still at this hour, there is no better time to meditate. Sitting at this magical hour, steeped in the gently rising energy of the planet as you are carried upwards into the dawn, is the highlight of a self-course. I wouldn't miss it if I were you.

Secondly, I want to point out that although I'm writing from the perspective of a meditation practice, that

needn't discourage those of you who haven't got one. By all means, tailor your own program. Although I would be most delighted indeed if this article motivated someone to seek out their first meditation instruction, it isn't necessary. You could do any number of other things besides meditation in the time between teas. You could practice yoga, sacred dance, pray, listen to all nine of your favorite symphonies from start to finish, or even just drink tea from morning to night... Whatever suits you. However, I would certainly choose something that leads you towards stillness of mind. For that reason, I also recommend that you make a strong determination to practice silence throughout your course.

Tea time, meditation time

Before moving on to how to prepare for your course, I do want to talk about the schedule a bit. For me, a small bowl of matcha is a really nice way to raise my alertness and energy for that early morning sit, and it doesn't bother my stomach. But many people can only drink matcha after eating. You might instead wish to enjoy a bowl of tea with a single leaf or two of red tea to energize you. Even plain hot water is quite invigorating. I have found that having tea rather than meditation directly after breakfast is best, because I haven't had quite as long to digest my food, as I will have at lunchtime, which interferes with meditation. Also, properly chosen tea will help my digestion along as well, which is more important on a day when I am going to be so sedentary.

In the evening, I have tried several different schedules between 1:00 and 7:00. I've tried three hours of meditation followed by three hours of tea and vice-versa, or two shorter tea sessions around a big meditation session, and so on. Of course, this period is six hours of meditation no matter how you 'divide' it, but at the same time you can in a sense shift the focus between meditation and tea. I have found that the schedule above has the smoothest, most natural flow, especially for a one-day course. It's a nice pace, and I am well-prepared to really get the most out of those three hours with one tea after a two hour sit.

The final decision to make here is to make gongfu tea or not. Remember that gongfu tea preparation is more challenging and active than bowl tea. For a longer course I drink all bowl-tea the first day, and save a really fine and patient gongfu tea for when I'm more settled down. For the same reason, if I do drink gongfu tea on a one day course, I will save it for this last tea session. You will also take in less



liquid if you drink gongfu tea, so if you have to be careful about how much you drink in the evening to avoid visiting the bathroom all night, that might also be a factor to consider.

Write out the schedule

I write or print a piece of paper with the schedule on it, but for me this can be one of the pitfalls of a self-course. I am, in a sense, the “director” of the day, so it’s easy for that habitual “what’s next” mentality to sneak its way into my course through the form of the schedule, because I have to make whatever is next happen and happen on time, as it were. I have enough of this mentality in daily life and want to work on dropping it at least for today. I also find myself wanting to simply look at the schedule over and over. So, I do my best to pretend it doesn’t exist until it’s time for the next event.

I have found two tricks that really help me with this. One is that I write the schedule well in advance, so that I’ve forgotten it. Another is that I literally write events on the paper spaced out and then folded in such a way that I only see the current event and its time slot. Then when it’s time, I get to watch with childlike wonder as the next event literally unfolds before my eyes. It’s actually fun, and believe it or not, it was a vehicle for some deep insights for me in my most recent course.

Tea IS cleaning

There is a saying in this tradition that Cha Dao is 80% cleaning, both inside and outside. I always thoroughly clean the house the day before I begin. It’s a good way to prepare yourself internally as well as externally, as cultivating a pure environment is always beneficial to the cultivation of a pure mind. I also try to begin to enter into the space I am creating for my course, by doing my cleaning as mindfully as possible, thereby beginning my internal cleaning as well.

By keeping my tea area clean (define this as you wish, but for me it’s really the whole house) I demonstrate my respect and gratitude for my tea, and begin to prepare for the tea session just as much as I do when I light the fire. As the years have gone by, I more and more palpably feel the two as one action. I can honestly say that cleaning is no longer any more of a “chore” or something I have to do before I can start drinking tea than preparing *chaxi* or washing the teapot are. When the cleaning commences, so has the tea preparation.

If you haven’t paid much attention to the effect that your cleaning (both before and after a tea session) has on both yourself and your tea, make sure to pay close attention from now on. Take the time to reflect on how much nicer your tea will be tomorrow in a bright clean uncluttered home where nothing has been left undone. We all know that feeling, when we are trying to relax in the face of some put-off responsibility; it just doesn’t work, you can’t

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settle into it. Similarly, if we don't take the time to prepare for our session as we would to welcome a guest into our homes, our sessions will be lacking in depth.

I also include smudging, and play sacred music throughout the house the day before, even while I'm at work, to pump some extra energy into the space that will help the day go well. Naturally, you will want to turn off all your "Googles", as we like to refer to any communication/entertainment devices around here. Bury them if you have to, but eliminate them from your reality. You will probably survive without them. Use a clock or a watch, not your phone, to check the time.

What to listen to?

You may be tempted to leave the discourse out, wanting more tea, or an earlier bedtime perhaps. Or maybe it just sounds out of sync in a day of silence. But I have found that it's quite important for me. For one thing, it scratches that "mind itch" a little bit. It gives my mind something to feed on, as it were. But instead of the rubbish my mind probably wanted to feed on all day, I'm feeding it something healthy instead; and if I have another day ahead of me, that energy carries into my sleep and is still there the next day, leaving me more attuned and prepared. It guides my thoughts and insights in a good direction, and can motivate me with a greater sense of purpose as well.

Even in a one-day course though, the discourse period is important because I have very much been cultivating myself to receive spiritual insight all day, and I will absorb any teaching more deeply than I might have otherwise. This is also a big part of why practicing silence throughout the day is crucial. So be sure to choose appropriate reading(s) or audio recording(s) for this important period each day.

Tea for dinner!

You may have noticed, there is no dinner listed in the schedule above. One of the powerful medicinal properties of tea is that it cleanses the body of impurities. Fasting has been an aspect of spiritual and physical cleansing as long as humans have existed, and tea has the ability to accelerate both the spiritual and physical benefits fasting has to offer. In light of that, I would also encourage those of you who aren't strict vegetarians to make the effort during your course.

We often challenge guests to at least try a vegetarian lifestyle for a period of time, just to see if it's really as bad as they think. After all, meat will still be there, so it's not as though there is anything to lose beyond a little discomfort. If nothing else, it's always good to take a stand and face down anything outside of us that we give power to, such as the feeling that we "have" to eat meat to avoid discomfort.

An average person will notice a big difference in their sensitivity and energy levels increasing within three

months or so, but if you also drink tea every day as part of the shift, pretty much everyone will realize huge differences within a month or even less! So even if it's only for a day, this is a good chance to witness this powerful property of tea for yourself, and being so light and clean inside will greatly increase your appreciation for your evening tea session. I bet you will notice a big difference. It also doesn't hurt to reflect on how fortunate we are that we can skip a meal as a choice, when so many others alive today are struggling to eat.

At first I reacted to the idea of needing to prepare meals during a self-course as though it was a disturbance, but it isn't really a big deal at all, it just calls for a bit of preparation. The one important factor to consider, besides eating vegetarian food, is that you also choose meals that are relatively bland. Don't torture yourself; just avoid strong spices and things like garlic, or soda, because it will really get in the way of your tea. You should know exactly what you are going to eat for each meal in advance, and make sure the ingredients are all bought. You can go further, and do the prep before you start so you can just throw it in the pan. Or even avoid cooking altogether and go raw.

There are plenty of healthy and appropriate meals that can be made entirely in advance, depending on the length of the course. I once made a large container of a hearty salad with nuts and beans and such and had that for lunch each day. Another time I prepared a few vegetable wraps. Shane suggests making a variety of veggie burritos and freezing them. There are lots of good options. On the other hand, why not have freshly prepared food every day instead? Don't forget, after all, that we are making tea!

One of the integral reasons we practice tea in addition to meditation is the realization that my practice is somewhat useless if I can only find peace when I am sitting down in meditation. And this is a tradition of service to others, so use the power of intention that lies behind a day like this to fill all your slicing and dicing with mindfulness and presence. There are tons of other things you have to do like make the bed and get dressed and shower and brush your teeth—chopping a bit of food isn't that much more complicated. Prepare your day's tea with each chop and brush!

Friends and family

Obviously, it's quite rude to just suddenly stop talking to everyone without notice, and if you have roommates this can be a big challenge. Of course explain what you are doing, give them your schedule, and discuss any compromises that might need to happen. Then remind everyone again soon before, asking them to save anything less than very unexpected and important for when you are finished. Do your best to tie up any loose-ends and affairs that might require your input or communication, especially with roommates or significant others.

It's important not to be too overbearing and attached to the 'rules' in this area. That said, I have always



scheduled my courses at a time when the house will naturally be empty. If that won't be possible, then be sure to be respectful of the fact that other people are *not* practicing silence, and *not* meditating (probably). They are just living their daily lives, as they have a right to. I am the one who is importuning. This puts the responsibility on me, not them.

I would do my best to schedule around their day to minimize contact naturally, and not be demanding about their behavior. My state of mind is my responsibility, not theirs, and whatever arises is my practice. I have informed them about what I am doing; what they do with that is not my responsibility. If I live with the kind of person who is going to watch a Die Hard marathon that night, well, I did choose that roommate, so trying to meditate to the sound of grenades must be what I need!

The course

Now that everything is in perfect order, we are ready to begin! And naturally, with everything in its proper place, there is only one thing that can happen. It begins to unravel, of course! In spite of all preparations, it happens to me every time. It will probably happen to you. A friend came and intruded on my course.

They *knew* I was meditating and practicing silence, but they asked me to speak! Worst of all, it was not an emergency. It was an unnecessary intrusion, was *not* even really my business, and it could have been handled without

bothering me. Nobody really *needed* to bother me, but they did anyway! It was horrible! I actually had no choice but to open my mouth and speak, when I'm not *supposed* to be speaking! There I was, developing equanimity and compassion for my fellow man, and this inconsiderate, unthinking *jerk*... Ah, wait a minute... Back to equanimity practice.

Nothing has stopped me from getting the most out of meditation more than too much rigidity. Of course many people may find that looseness is their tendency, so look for that too. As the famous adage says, too loose and the string makes no sound, too tight and it breaks. This won't be a structured, volunteer-run facility with rigidly defined boundaries, rules, and a fence running around it, as it would be at a meditation center. This has its pros and cons, but make full use of the advantages. Then make full use of the so-called disadvantages as well! The only alternative is to complain about them, which is pointless. Trying to pick and choose what you are willing to work with or accept just results in slower growth and progress. Everything is an opportunity for growth.

Meditating with a friend

I won't say too much about this, as I've only sat with another person once. We split the chores of the day, with one of us cooking a meal and the other one cleaning it up, and took turns preparing tea. If you anticipate strug-

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gling to stay out of the fridge, off the TV, actually waking up at 4am and so on, it could be a great idea to have the moral support. There is no doubt that doing this entirely on your own requires more discipline than if you have a partner. Make sure though, that you are both committed to supporting each other in creating a distraction-free space. Be sure you both agree on what this means and that it is well and clearly communicated in advance. This can be tricky with a romantic partner especially.

Tea

As for considerations that are more specifically tea-related, there are a few things I have found which really enhance the course. When we make tea for guests, we ensure that as soon as one kettle is finished, there is always a new one ready to go, so the flow of tea is constant. I don't drink tea this way alone, and definitely not during a self-course. For one thing, I might explode from drinking so much tea. But besides that, those ten or fifteen minute breaks waiting for the water to boil are really nice pauses in which to simply sit with the tea. I also like to use this time to acquaint myself more intimately with the nuances of my kettle, as I can listen to it progress from start to finish as the water boils without the distraction of brewing tea at the same time.

I've also found that this is a good opportunity to use subtler brewing techniques, such as making water gong-fu, without the tea, or drinking bowl tea with one to three leaves of tea in the bowl. Sometimes I will burn a bit of subtle incense such as Aloeswood as well. As for music, it's the one potential exception as far as maintaining silence goes. For my first course, Wu De suggested playing a recorded series of sacred Tibetan bells throughout the tea sessions of the day. But unless you have something with a very specific purpose such as this in mind, it's best to drink in quiet. I definitely wouldn't practice pairing music and tea during a course, or listening simply for pleasure.

Lastly, I love to change the *chaxi* for each and every tea session. It's a beautiful practice to keep normally as well. I like to limit the changes I make to small and subtle ones that are still enough to produce an impact, as setting up a nice *chaxi* can take too long and be too distracting. I might switch scoops, or the tea boat, or the flower on the table only. I may even change two or three things, but I will maintain the fundamental theme I started with, or grow it into another one, as it were (perhaps a cool *chaxi* transitions towards warmth, for example). For a longer course, I might change the whole thing before going to sleep last thing at night. During a day of meditation and awareness of the temporary nature of reality, it is rewarding to actively participate in that energy by renewing the tea space and reflecting on this integral principal of tea.

Every course a tea-seed

I hope this article is useful to some of you, and that you will take the time for a course of your own soon. The most important thing is to be sure that this is a day of enjoyment, in spite of the discipline and work that are involved. I often feel as though I have never worked as hard in my life as I did during a course, yet at the same time no vacation has ever left me feeling so rested or refreshed.

Performing a course like this on your own is actually something really very special. There are meditation centers and tea centers, but we are a part of a unique tradition, which combines the two and creates tea-meditation centers. In creating and partaking in your own tea-meditation courses now, you are helping us to energetically pave the way towards our mountain retreat. You are demonstrating to the Universe that there is both the need and the willingness to heed the call for an awakening of harmony through tea.

Your self-courses will be the first manifestations of that space we are all creating together, the first flush, the Spring buds of tea-light opening for the first time in the same spirit of community with which we share these monthly bowls of tea. These openings and manifestations may be small and spread out across the world now, but the day is coming when they will be unified under one roof at Light Meets Life, which will offer nothing less than long-term dedicated tea-meditation courses where we can all sit together under one roof, complete with guaranteed "needless question protection", prepared meals, and everything else you'll need to have a productive course!



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