

THE FOURTH BOWL PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

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Continuing his discussion of the Eight Bowls of our tradition, Shen here explores the fourth bowl, which is all about diet and movement. He elucidates the ways in which our diet and exercise affect our tea practice and overall health.



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Joyously, we receive now the fifth bowl of warming tea. With open palms, we stretch forth towards the full bowl. Each infusion offering a slight difference in aroma and flavor, mouthfeel and body, as well as wisdom and insight. With this bowl, the very boundaries of reality begin to blur: Where the tea begins and we end becomes less and less apparent, and the movement and dance of Qi is now much more noticeable. Is it the Qi of the tea, or our own inherent Qi within that we feel? Or some combination of the two? Regardless, there is a flow of energy on the subtle and gross level that feels natural and graceful.

Brewing at the tea table requires balance, focus, groundedness, and dexterity. There is more at work than what is simply seen on the surface, and even then, the keen eye can perceive a complex, yet graceful flow stemming from the motions of the true master. Though the movements are complex and many, there is an obvious ease with which each motion is carried out. Just as the true *Chajin* drinks tea with the entire body, so too she brews in the same manner. As in Aikido, brewing motions come from and are refined

from a deep connection to the center of the body (*dan tian*, 丹田). This is often a source upon which to draw balance, connection to Earth, and power. I am reminded of my time tree planting many years ago, watching some of the experienced planters move effortlessly, even slowly it seemed. Yet, at the end of the day, their numbers put mine to shame. Though I felt I had worked harder and faster, it was a combination of experience, efficiency and consistency that lent them their relaxed demeanor and high output. Ultimately, those balanced, full-bodied motions manifest from a balanced, disciplined, and trained mind. What is on the mind will end up in the cup, but not first without traversing the ligaments and limbs of the body. For these reasons, it is important to properly acknowledge and fuel both the body and mind.

Outside of the tea table, it is then important for the person of Tea to further refine and train the body and mind through exercises such as Tai Qi, Qi Gong or Yoga. In these ways, we support our physical body through controlled, subtle movements, increasing our flexibility, range of motion and motor control.

As well, we promote our energetic bodies by moving in a natural way conducive to the flow of Qi—Qi coming in from our external environment, blending into our internal environment, and then expressed in a way that's transformed altogether.

Because the foods and thoughts we consume greatly affect our ability to serve tea, it is then very important to also monitor what type of fuel we put into our bodies. A poor quality tea brewed with the best of intentions will yield a better experience than the highest quality tea brewed with the worst of intentions. Ideally, the best tea is brewed with the best of intentions! But when doing without, we must learn to do within. In the same way, the intention we give our food has an incredible affect on the food itself and the way in which our body handles it. To a large extent, what you think about your food is more important than the food itself. For that reason, our attitude in preparing our meals is highly important, which is also why you'll see us dancing and laughing in the kitchen during meal preparation at the Hut!

Any food given with pure intention and received with a pure

heart will transcend all negativities attached to it. The ideal, of course, is to consume the best and freshest food with the best of intentions. In my experience, pure foods found in vegetarian and vegan diets suit the person of Tea quite well. Here at the center, we eat a vegetarian diet and always pray as a group over our meals. We feel lighter and more sensitive as a result, ready to approach each day with clarity of mind, levity of heart and health of body. In a similar fashion, we also pay careful attention to the diet of our mind. With daily meditation to quiet the mind, Tea to balance it and humor to stimulate levity, our mind also maintains a light and healthy figure. Though we don't have any say in what we perceive, one our greatest human traits is that we can cultivate the ability to control how we orient ourselves towards the things we perceive. Which is to say that when we can't control the diet of our mind, we can control how it is mentally ingested and used, just like how our thoughts about the food we eat can control, to a degree, how the body will use it.

In the bigger picture, physical wellbeing and diet can no longer be isolated as an individual aim. It must be considered on a larger scale—a scale where seven billion

other people karmicly connect. *Physical wellbeing and diet are global concepts...* Of course the foods we eat, which billions of other people also want to eat, will have a global impact. Therefore, we have to make conscious decisions surrounding the foods we eat and the products we buy, rather than choosing based on impulse and/or a false sense of security that this way of life is permanent, let alone sustainable! Choosing a plant-based diet, for example, automatically addresses issues such as climate change, natural resource conservation, and human health epidemics. In general, I dislike making arguments either for or against plant-based diets because no matter how obvious one side of the argument may seem, an equally persuasive counterargument can be made. Rather than pushing on the issue, (which only fuels the issue itself!) I personally make the decision, as a person of Tea (*Chajin*), to eat a plant-based diet (vegetarian or vegan) for my own well-being, which I experience myself, and for the well-being of all life on this planet.

How does Tea contribute to our physical wellbeing and diet? What we're talking about is health, and as our teacher so often says, "Health to us is anything which puts you in

harmony with Spirit and all life on Earth". Tea has always been known as the "Great Connector", connecting us to ourselves, to one another, and to Nature. She promotes conscious awakening and presence in every sip. When we share Tea in this spirit, we automatically subscribe to our own wellbeing and thus the wellbeing of those we serve.

For all practical purposes, it is important for the person of Tea to consider what foods and thoughts we consume and don't consume, and how we move and don't move our physical bodies and the energy within our bodies. All of these inputs will greatly affect our ability to serve and live a balanced life. And so, we remember to sit upright at the tea table, to maintain focus, and move with our entire being, connected to the Earth. We engage in exercises that support our life of Tea, and because we value our bodies, we carefully monitor what we put into them, and with what intention. We adopt a holistic and flexible point of view, seeing our bodies and minds as mirrors of one another, giving us real feedback in a real world, indicating our progress and development. We see this not only reflected in our ability to serve tea, but in all aspects of life...

