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KETTLE IN THE OFF-HAND

-Wu De

Now and then, it is important to return to the basics. This is the third part in our series on the Five Basics of Tea Brewing. While these principles also apply to bowl tea, they are primary in gongfu brewing as well.

Over the last two months we have been discussing the Five Basics of Tea Brewing. Strengthening the roots of any practice helps strengthen the tree. The deeper the roots are, the richer the nutrients and the more lush the crown. It is therefore important to return now and again to our beginnings and refine our foundation. This also helps to keep us humble, so that we remember where we've come from and how much we've grown. Often times, when you look back at the basics from years of practice, you find that you see so many new facets to them that you hadn't noticed when you first started. With an open, beginner's mind we can continue to grow and expand our gongfu, no matter how far we've come in our Tea journey.

Though these Five Basics of Tea Brewing are applicable to all tea practices and brewing methods, they are paramount to gongfu tea. The only difference is that other brewing styles, like leaves in a bowl, end at the Five Basics of Tea Brewing, while gongfu tea, on the other hand, builds on them—exploring more refined techniques and sensitivity as well. Still, they are as important for

a gongfu practice as for any tea practice.

So far, we've talked about separating the tea table down the middle and doing everything on the right side with the right hand and vice versa. This helps us stay balanced, front and center, which is very important energetically. It is also rude in Asian cultures to turn one's back on guests. The most important aspect of this principle, though, is that it protects our teaware. In decades of tea brewing, the number one reason I have seen for teaware getting knocked over and/or broken is due to reaching across the table with the opposite hand, which leaves the teapot in a blind spot that you can easily hit when you return to an upright posture.

Then, last month we talked about all the circular movements in tea brewing, and there are many, like filling the pot with water or pouring the tea into the cups, etc. All of the circular movements done with the left hand should be clockwise, and with the right hand, counter-clockwise. An easier way to remember this is that the circular movements are towards the center. This is to do with the ergonomics of our body

and the natural energy flow from our center to our wrists/hands. Hopefully you tried the experiment last month and are ready to move on to the third basic.

The third Basic of Tea Brewing is to do with the kettle: *always put the kettle on the off-hand side and use the off-hand to handle the kettle.* This means that if you are right-handed, the kettle should be on your left side, and that you should always use your left hand to pour water. If you are left-handed, then the kettle goes on the right side. There are many reasons why this is an important basic of all tea brewing. If you have made a habit of picking up the kettle with the strong hand, you will want to break it as soon as possible.

The first practical reason why we hold the kettle in our off-hand is something we talked about briefly when we discussed the first Basic of Tea Brewing, which is that it is important that our tea brewing be balanced. Studies have shown that people are often much more efficient and stronger with the hand they use more often, especially right-handed people (lefties are more ambidextrous). In fact, many of us live life as though our

off-hand were some kind of evolutionary vestige like the tail bone, rarely using it to do anything at all. Occasionally our off-hand lends a bit of support to our activities, but rarely do we choose to balance our day-to-day actions in a centered way that is in harmony with the activity itself. One insightful practice you might try is to spend a Saturday doing everything with two hands, seeing what understanding arises as a result. Some students have tried spending a whole day doing every little thing with two hands, and have realized how mindlessly many activities are done, and just how off-keel their bodies are, along with many other insights...

Brewing tea should be balanced from the center of the body, the “*dan tian*, 丹田”. When we breathe and move from our core, the energy comes from our heart-center and changes the whole way we relate to the tea-brewing process. By using our off-hand to manipulate the heaviest object in brewing, we help strengthen it and bring more balance to both sides of our body. In that way, energy (Qi) begins to flow evenly through both arms and the brewing is motivated differently.

The most important reason for using the off-hand to hold the kettle, though, has to do with fluency. Smoothness and fluency in brewing are the most relevant factors of

gongfu tea, which is why this basic is the one that is most applicable to a gongfu brewing methodology. The others relate equally to all types of tea brewing. But as you progress in gongfu tea, you find that smoothness and fluency really influence the quality of the cup. Remember our discussions of the poem, which preserves the methodology of this tradition? The final line of the poem is “everything is finished in one breath.” If you recall, this is the most difficult line to translate because it literally translates to “everything is finished in one Qi.” While this line does relate to breath, it also refers to the fact that everything should be done in one *energy*—in one movement, without hesitation or discord. Everything should flow smoothly, in other words.

Almost everyone inherently knows that the pot should be in the strong hand—even if it is an Yixing pot which can be used by either hand. This is energetically important. If you also put the kettle in the strong hand, the brewing itself becomes clunky, with many stops and starts. To brew in this way, you have to pick the kettle up and fill the pot, set the kettle down and then pick up the pot with that same hand. There is an awkward pause between each movement, and the left side of the body is uninvolved

(or the right side for lefties). When you use the off-hand to handle the kettle there is much greater fluency. You can pick up the kettle with the off-hand and remove the lid from the pot with the strong hand. Then you fill the pot and at the instant the off-hand is returning the kettle, the strong hand has already lifted the pot to start pouring into the cups. This is much smoother and without hesitation. It is all one movement, in other words. The real importance of this basic is based in such smooth, graceful fluency: *If fluency in tea brewing matters to you, then the kettle should be held by the off-hand.*

Whether you have been using the off-hand or not, this month's experiment involves using both. Try using two identical cups and do two different steepings back to back: one in which the kettle is in the off-hand and another holding it in the strong hand. Steep the tea quickly both times so that both cups are relatively the same temperature. Try to notice the difference in the smoothness and fluency of the process itself. Then, after the two steepings, try the two cups of tea side by side. Are they different? Is one smoother? Can you recognize the difference in them? As usual, we are excited to hear about your insights: globalteahut@gmail.com

