



STAY WITH THE TEA

-Wu De

Now and then, it is important to return to the basics. This is the last in our series on the Five Basics of Tea Brewing. Let us all use this review to refine our understanding of tea preparation and learn new and better aspects of gongfu.

Over the last four issues, we've discussed the Five Basics of Tea Brewing in great detail, renewing parts of them each issue to keep them fresh, and to continue practicing them. Remember, *advanced techniques are basic techniques mastered*. We can't repeat that enough. It is a mistake to think that the master has grown out of the basics. Many people think that the amazing concert pianist just showed up and performed, living the easy life. But most master musicians practice hours a day, and often scales are included in that practice. Without strong roots, a tree will never grow tall. In this final month of the basics, review each one and take note of the ways you've grown over time, as well as the areas you could still improve.

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 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.

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 other side. There are many reasons why this is an important basic of all tea brew-

ing. 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. 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.

Last month we turned to the fourth Basic of Tea Brewing, and in doing so took our list inwards: Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever pick up the kettle until your heart is still. (That's right, ten 'evers'!) The time it takes the water to boil has always been a time for meditation. In traditional times, Chajin called the sound boiling water makes "the wind sighing the pines". If you use a metal kettle, you may also share in this



sentiment. Nothing will improve your tea brewing more than a still heart, a heart free from obstructions. And if you are talking, out loud or in your mind, nothing with mastery, quietude or grace will follow. Instead, you may leave a trail of broken teaware behind you. In order to achieve mastery of gongfu tea, concentration and focus will be needed.

This month we turn to the last of the Five Basics of Tea Brewing: *Stay with the tea*. Quieting the mind while the water is boiling, and finding the Stillness within before raising the kettle and initiating the brewing process is important, but it would all be lost if you start chatting immediately after picking the kettle up. This last principal is about putting all your attention, concentration and one-pointedness of mind (*samadhi*) into the brewing process. All your attention, heart and focus should be on the pouring, steeping, decanting and serving the tea to the guests. Not a drop of attention should be spilled—by distracting thoughts, conversations, etc. Traditionally, it was thought to be rude in Chinese culture to talk while pouring the tea, as the mind of those words would then be in the cup.

Even businessmen discussing deals or scholar-artists debating the merits of a particular poem would pause in their conversations to pour their tea. This also inspires better listening, which means better conversations.

Only when the cups or bowls have been handed out to all your guests can you withdraw your attention from the process. The master brewer becomes the brewing, as with any other art. In order to become the process, you will have to completely immerse yourself in it. The shogun Hideyoshi complimented the great tea master Rikyu, saying that when he prepared tea he was like the greatest of samurai warriors in a martial contest: there is nowhere to penetrate. His concentration was so complete, in other words, that there was no possibility of disturbance. I have seen a fly land on a master while brewing, and watched with amazement as the process went on totally undisturbed. My favorite picture of my master shows him at peace while some tea steeps, though he is surrounded by dozens of noisy guests taking photos and talking. *Stay with the tea*.

For some time, this will mean that you can't talk during the actual

brewing. This doesn't matter in a silent session. (Or does it? What about internal dialogue?) But in those where we are connecting to others through heartfelt conversation, relaxed dialogue, etc. you will find that over time these pauses are not awkward, but desirable. If the conversation drifts into topics that promote a loss of presence, you, as the host, can change the topic back to awakening things. And you always have the perfect subject to discuss: *the tea!* Bring the guests back to the tea. Ask them about its flavor or aroma. Ask them about the bowl or cup. Invite them to notice the simple wonders in this moment, here and now. Invite them to be present.

To be with the tea from the raising of the kettle to the distribution of the cups or bowls, completely focused and absorbed in what you are doing will improve your tea, not to mention bring a mindfulness to the art of tea that promotes cultivation, discipline—gongfu!

As usual, we are excited to hear about your insights: globalteahut@gmail.com