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DO YOU REALLY NEED TO WARM THOSE CUPS?

-Sam Gibb

In Sam's first ever experiment, he reinforces what we always say in this section of the magazine: experiential understanding is necessary to make progress in mastery of gongfu tea. Preserving the heat is the most important practical aspect of tea brewing, and therefore worth testing and retesting in its every facet.

I have allowed myself to cultivate a few bad habits over the course of my life. Some that know me a little better might say 'a few' would be an understatement, perhaps some people that don't know me so well would also agree with that. One of the broader categories that affects many aspects of my life, shifting form to suit the occasion, would be laziness. It often comes in the guise of approaching things in my life with the aim of just completing them, without attention to the *how* I finish, just the desire *to* finish. Obviously, this is not a path to any sort of mastery; and well, the road can get pretty bumpy to say the least.

The issue with allowing this mindset to exist is that it seeps into all aspects of your life, including your Tea practice! The path of Cha Dao is about realizing that ultimately there is no separation between any elements of your life. We bring our whole selves to the tea table. Thus a tea session never really begins or ends, but merely flows from one session to the next. Our lives become our tea practice, so tea becomes a Way, and upon finding 'a Way', we find 'The Way'.

The reason for this long-winded introduction is that I realized this

was the first experiment I have ever done by myself... Because I live in an environment where experiments are constantly happening and I have a teacher that has undertaken all these experiments before, I guess my underlying assumption was, why bother? I trust that others have done the work for me, and beyond that, it takes effort. But here we come to an important crossroad in all spiritual cultivation. To use my teachers words: "The Buddha's enlightenment is not your own. To truly grow we must step out of the comfortable shelter of those who came before us. By stepping into the elements we find our own home, our own truth." It is in this spirit that I introduce my first gongfu experiment: "Do you really need to warm those cups?"

When we brew gongfu tea, we seem to be constantly warming things. The pot, the cups—well, just the pot and cups, but we do it constantly. We shower the pot before pouring the water inside and after the pot is full. We also warm the cups in between each brew by filling them part way from the kettle. I decided to see what the difference would be between warming and not warming the cups, and especially

the influence this would have on the tea. This experiment is relatively easy to do, and as one of the guests here put it, "The difference is shockingly obvious."

What you will need:

This experiment is fairly basic in terms of what you will need. Two identical porcelain cups are ideal. You'll want to try and limit the influencing factors as much as possible. You can do another experiment to see the affect of using different cups, but for the sake of this experiment try to use identical cups. You will also need an Yixing pot, ideally. However, if you do not have one you could use a different brewing vessel. Another key element to this experiment (and Cha Dao in general) is some tea. We used a lightly oxidized oolong and brewed it very lightly. This makes it easier to spot the differences, especially in the mouthfeel. You could use any tea you like, but it is recommended to brew it lightly. In fact, you could even try this experiment without tea! Last, but certainly not least, you will need water. As many of you know, both experientially and

from reading this magazine, we collect water from a mountain spring weekly. Clean, well-structured water will make the experiment much easier to conduct. The differences in mouthfeel will be much more pronounced. I used a clay kettle and an infrared burner to heat my water, but any source of heat will work for this experiment as long as it is consistent.

How I undertook this experiment:

The procedure is very simple: You start with your cups and teapot as usual. Clean your cups and heat the pot before you rinse your tea leaves as you normally would. Before steeping your first infusion, add water from the kettle to one of your cups and not the other. Then add water to your teapot. This will warm the cup as the tea steeps. When you (or the tea) are ready,

empty the cup and pour between the heated and non-heated cups. Try to distribute the tea evenly, not only in the amount but also in where in the teapot it comes from. The tea liquor from the bottom of the pot has steeped longer than the tea that pours out initially. Move back and forth between the cups, trying to get the same color and amount of tea in both cups.

With a cup in each hand, taste back and forth between the two cups, starting with the non-heated cup. Note any differences in mouthfeel, aroma, taste and Qi. Pay the most attention to the mouthfeel initially. Try to notice if there is any difference in the temperature, the way the tea coats the mouth, the structure of the water (does it stay together in your mouth?), where the tea sits in your mouth, how it swallows and so on. Simply put, is it comfortable in your mouth? It helps to have a notebook on hand to write down your experiences. Try this for

at least three steepings to consolidate what you have found. It can be helpful to do this experiment with someone else in silence and then compare your findings afterwards.

Experiments are an important part of progressing in Cha Dao. Without our experiential understanding of tea, we are merely reciting the words and experiences of others. Remember that refinement in tea is ultimately about the refinement of ourselves, and there are no shortcuts in this process. So, I encourage you to take the time this month to refine your tea and yourself!

We would love to hear how you went with this experiment. Don't be lazy like I have been! Share your results with us, either via our discussion board, on our website or by writing to us at:

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