

A BOWL AND A BED

Article by Jarrod Quon

“There is always a bowl and a bed waiting for you.”

These simple words uttered at the end of a tea session would turn out to be some of the most influential in my life.

Like many of us, my journey into tea began with a chance meeting over tea with Wu De. I was in Venice Beach, CA at Temple Tea and was just coming to drink some new tea and check out what a Chinese tea ceremony was like. I was sitting at a long wooden table cut from a single tree and I experienced my first Puerh in years.

I had forgotten my first experience with Puerh, thinking only of the tea from years of Chinese restaurants and the few dates long ago with girls and agendas. Tea was then just an excuse to get together, spend time with a pretty girl and pretend to be interesting, or to wash down some Kung Pao Chicken. The experience of losing a whole day to one tea session with a girl was buried deep in my memory. But now sitting, and sipping from my bowl, I remembered the mystery that began to blossom in me. “What is going on in this bowl?”

The world dropped away, my body started to hum and buzz, arms and face tingling, a calm excitement grew, and a clarity revealed itself. As I continued to drink bowl after bowl a peace and stillness grew in my heart and the words Wu De spoke seemed to sound more for me and less like just another thing I was checking out. As the session ended, I heard him speak right to me “There is always a bowl and a bed waiting for you.” In that moment I knew he was inviting me to come to Taiwan.

I have received invitations before, and many less outlandish and more reasonable, but this was the first and I hope not the last, that stirred something inside me and had me thoughtlessly answer, “Yes.” After that “yes” my life started to shift and things that normally would be dismissed out of hand were now shining brightly in my everyday life. A friend expressing their enjoyment of tea, a gig that paid the same amount as a ticket to Taiwan, my girlfriend talking about how I always wanted to travel the world. That simple “yes” would go on to alter the well-grooved path of my life and lead me to spend two weeks at the Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan. And while these changes in my life were visible on the surface, it was the others deep within that truly altered me had me, in order to bring the spirit of tea back to Los Angeles in my heart.

The first two days in Taiwan, I went through the expected transitions from changing sides of the globe, struggling to keep my eyes open during lunch, waking up at 3 AM, and a general sense of confusion. However, even through my jetlag I was still experiencing something different than I expected: The center is open to the pub-

lic, and many times a day several different faces would wander in for a bowl of tea or two; or just to check out what was going on—from a pair of French Canadians, to students and friends, to an incredibly foul-mouthed hermit. Each of them had their own stories and reasons and issues, but each of them was served a bowl with a smile and given love and space. My tired body was slowly waking to the realization that there is something special happening in the mountain town of Miaoli, down a little alley, just waiting for anyone to stop in.

As the days continued and my body woke to this new life, Wu De’s smiling face, the aroma of burning incense, the feel of a hot bowl of tea in my hands, it all started to melt the hardness and cynicism around my heart that I had spent many years forging. I found myself joining in discussions, meditations, weekly outings, movie nights, tea reviews, and tea lectures. I was surprised by how much joy came from all of these activities. Had you asked me before, I would have only authentically been interested in movie nights and would never have thought I would sit through a three-hour lecture on tea in Taiwanese untranslated, let alone find deep peace and wisdom in it.

I came to love seeing each person who lives at and runs the center coming day and night, living their lives in service to tea. I couldn’t help but join in. At first I lived out my secret fantasy of being a monk and living a life of quiet service—praying and meditating and being at peace with everything. However, this fantasy was quickly interrupted by the most amazing thing: the students’ problems and complaints were no different from the ones I brought from LA and was hiding under my fantasy. Troubles with their loved one, not enough time in the day to do what they wanted, things going wrong and things not turning out the way they wanted. How could they be at peace and continue to serve with all of these things going on? I was pretending to ignore my problems but the others were voicing them and discussing them in each moment and meeting. Seeing them deepen their journey into themselves and into tea was so intoxicating to me, as were their victories and setbacks all placed on the altar and burned up in their service to tea. Each moment a teacher, each experience a chance to look within, each interaction a mirror of themselves. I started to share more about myself and my life—faster than I have ever known—and as I shared my true concerns and fears, the center seemed to grow warmer and more comforting, the people more caring and loving, and the tea wiser and more profound.



I then remembered a major reason for coming to Taiwan was to travel, so I set off from Miaoli and journeyed into the heart of Taiwan, bringing with me the warmth and love of the center. As I visited Taipei and the museums and tea houses there, I got a sense of the pride the Taiwanese have for their homeland. But it wasn't until riding a scooter into Taroko Gorge that I truly understood the beauty of this island. I sped along the valley roads occasionally glancing up. I felt I was riding through an ancient Chinese scroll painting. I would stop and wander up a path and see dragonflies, butterflies, crickets, birds I could not even begin to place, monkeys, misty cliffs, lone trees creeping out of the side of a rock face; it was all there. I felt enormous connection to the sages of old, viewing what they had meditated and lived hundreds of years ago, and experiencing what I imagine must have been the same reverence and humble joy before such vistas.

As this connection pulled me deeper into the gorge, my old fears and concerns began to loom once again, as clouds approaching the full moon, threatening to block out all the light and beauty from before. "What am I doing?" "How am I going to get back?" "I don't know where I am going or even how to speak the language." I searched for the warmth and love of the center, only to find more clouds. I had left Miaoli with two bags and a desire to travel, but little in the way of plans or any idea of how to go about it.

Once again, it was a thoughtless "yes" that brought the answer. A "yes" to a Taiwanese mother and daughter from New Jersey that helped me find a place to stay, a "yes" to a retired Taiwanese English teacher who offered to drive me over the highest mountain road in Taiwan to the beautiful and famous Sun Moon Lake, a "yes" to a Beijing graduate student who offered to share his hostel room and day with me, a "yes" to the lunch, tour, and interview with the owner of Sun Moon Lake Tea Company who opened his factory to me. The kindness and generosity of every person humbled me greatly and was as great a teacher as the many hours I had spent at the center with Wu De over a bowl of tea.

Now, back in Los Angeles, my previous life has gripped me all over again: Deadlines, friends, my fiancé, work, and family. The clouds once again seem to be threatening to block out the beauty and serenity of the moon. How do I bring the peace and joy that resonates and fills the walls of the center back to my apartment in the City of Angeles?

A thoughtless "yes"