

INCLUSION IS THE WAY FORWARD

BY WU DE

In an awakened heart, the consequences of one's choices are never ignored. Some of our actions have apparent effects, while others create invisible results—too distant or subtle to be obvious. Though much of what we do is bound up in the apparent consequences of our choices—the day to day challenges in our immediate environment—the compassionate and awakened heart also takes responsibility for the influence she has on distant situations, being conscious of how her choices effect tea growers on the other side of the world, for example. It is our responsibility to rest in the truth that our choices impact the world, encouraging others to see their connection by consciously acting on ours. If you love tea, and we know you do, you *want* to recognize the impact your tea drinking has on the world, big and small, positive and negative. When you live in California and are enjoying some tea grown in a small village in China it is no longer possible for you to deny the global connectivity that humanity has achieved. And if you really love that tea, you also cannot ignore the simple fact that *you care*, you really do!

The compassionate heart doesn't seek to fight or exclude people. Recognizing our connection to Nature and each other, we also realize the fundamental truth that we are all in this together. Every being on this planet has an equal stake in its fate. At the same time, that doesn't mean we can or should not stand up against behavior that so obviously leads to the success of some few individuals at the expense of whole species, or even our own future generations. Sometimes you have to make a choice, and that doesn't mean you are unforgiving of the ones participating in that activity. As I used to tell the kindergarten students I taught, "It isn't you who are naughty. You are good. It is *what you are doing* that is naughty!" And we have to wake people up to that—to their connection to others and to the world—while at the same time standing up for what is right. William Faulkner said it quite poignantly:

Some things you must always be unable to bear. Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. No matter how young you are or how old you have got. Not for kudos and not for cash. Your picture in the paper nor money in the bank, neither. Just refuse to bear them.

Still, the "refusal" Faulkner mentions need not be charged with negativity. Too much resistance only causes people to dig in their heels. It disconnects us and moves us further apart. I'm sure you have had the experience of

arguing with someone when you absolutely know you are correct. The harder you push, the more it seems they retreat into their unreasonableness, and though you may "win" the argument, you feel worse than when you started, and more disconnected. That you had logic on your side is little consolation. It is only with compassionate understanding as well as mutual goals that we can effect real and lasting changes in the world.

I would like to illuminate some of the challenges I see amongst tea vendors with regards to a global movement towards organic and sustainable tea production. Of course, there are the big companies, primarily producing tea bags, whose problems are more obvious to the tea lover. They are also more challenging to address. Few of us around here are purchasing much of that tea, anyway. But I want to address the merchants who honestly do love tea and care about the loose-leaf teas they sell. If they don't recognize or care about the environmental impact their company has on Nature and the tea industry, we can only do our best to help them feel the truth in such connections. Meanwhile, we can also express our dissatisfaction kindly and use our buying power to make wiser choices that support those who are awakened to the importance of sustainable agricultural practices.

If you search around the Internet you will find more than a few tea vendors who have addressed the issue of organics overtly. Others will if you ask them. The arguments that they give for why their teas *aren't* organic are usually one of these three (or some combination of them): 1) Organic teas aren't good enough quality; 2) Many small farmers are organic, but cannot afford certification; or 3) The certification process itself has issues, including but not limited to corruption. I think it is important to address these ideas, and understand why we as tea lovers must refuse to stand for them.

Organic teas aren't good enough quality.

Though this seems to me the most foolish of the three arguments, it is the one you hear most often. The first problem with this idea is that all teas produced for thousands and thousands of years were organic, and if you have ever tried some of the old, vintage tea that is still around (like a very old Puerh) you know that those teas are amazing. In fact, a part of why aged teas are so desirable is that they come from a world before agro-pollution of any kind. High quality teas were sent as tribute to the emperors for centuries, and the poetry that eulogizes such



Organic leaves nibbled by bugs

amazing brews is not suggestive of low-quality tea. Therefore, it is important to recognize that we do have the capability to grow better, more delicious crops organically; and that amazing teas were produced that way for centuries.

Still, even if the organic teas produced nowadays aren't as good as their counterparts, this argument creates an inescapable catch: if no one supports organic farmers, and organic processes do not succeed in the market, how will the quality ever improve? In order for the production skills, effort and care of organic tea to improve, more people will have to start supporting organic endeavors. As demand increases, farmers and tea producers will invest more in creating higher quality organic teas.

Also, this argument really only applies to teas that are available in mainstream tea markets. If you know where to look, you can find amazingly delicious organic teas like the ones we find for you every month. Nevertheless, recognizing that quality is determined by flavor brings us to the final issue we have with the argument that organic teas aren't as good.

As I discussed in March's issue (which you can see for free on our site if you weren't subscribed at the time), we must rethink what we want. Our value systems need to start including provenance. In other words, how a tea is produced should be as relevant to its quality as how it tastes. We no longer have the luxury of enjoying personal satisfaction at the expense of environmental destruc-

tion. Better to have a tea that tastes worse than one that destroys Nature, just like it's better to eat a blander dinner that's good for us than to eat unhealthy junk food that tastes "better". Some of the so-called "good" flavors in junk food don't even taste very nice once you realize where they come from. Looking at fresh, green rows of chemical-laden tea is akin to looking at a really buff guy on the cover of a magazine who only looks that way because he took lots of steroids that are bad for him—doing irreparable internal damage. Is the surface really the end of our value system? Is a good taste all we want from tea?

Many small farmers are organic, but cannot afford certification

There is truth in this actually. Not only is certification relatively expensive, but there is no global certification process, making it impossible for a local farmer to get certified in all the countries his tea may wind up in. Also, the standards aren't universal amongst the different tests, so while he may be certified MOA in Taiwan (see previous issues to learn about MOA), he won't necessarily meet the more rigorous tests of the European Union, especially if some of his neighbors aren't growing organic tea. Some small farmers in Taiwan, for example, are only interested in the local market. They don't grow enough for international business, and don't speak English any-

way. It would consequently be a waste for such a farmer to apply for USDA organic certification, even if he was interested in certification.

Recently, some groups have begun helping the farmers that cannot afford certification to achieve their goals. Most often, these groups were formed by conscious tea merchants who care about the environment. They recognize that if the farms whose teas they sell have certification it also benefits their business and therefore raise money to help the farmers achieve that. Master Tsai, who has shared teas with Global Tea Hut several times, is a shining example of that. He has raised money by doing events, drives and from customers to help certain farmers make certification more affordable. This is an excellent way for a merchant who cares about the environment to get involved.

Rather than complaining that many farmers don't have certification, a conscious vendor of their teas should work towards helping them achieve that—to the mutual benefit of the farmer and vendor alike. Furthermore, we find that most all the vendors who use this argument do not, anywhere on their websites, provide examples of farms which produce tea organically but are not certified. In other words, they say they don't sell organic tea because small farmers cannot afford certification, or the process is complicated internationally, and then don't offer a link or an explanation as to which of the teas they stock fall into this category. Does lack of certification make a tea inorganic? If you have teas that are clean, though the small farmer cannot afford certification, why not tell me so? I recognize that claiming a tea is "organic" is illegal without certification, but they could show pictures of the farm and farmer and discuss the fact that his farm is small, and that he adds no agro-chemicals, concluding with full disclosure that the tea is not certified organic. Several of our Tea of the Month teas fall into this category. What we find, on the other hand, is more of an attitude of "small farmers cannot afford organic certification, therefore we don't carry organic teas."

The certification process itself has issues, including but not limited to corruption.

This argument also has merits. There is a lot of corruption in the world, but that is no reason to give up! Some certification processes, like MOA, are more reliable, and others less so. This is why it is important to choose vendors that you trust. A vendor who encounters this problem may want to join one or many of the movements towards more rigorous certification standards, recognizing that there will always be corruption in such processes as long as humans are willing to sell their connection to Nature, not realizing that the loss "over there" which resulted in their personal profit "over here" still effects them, their world and future generations of their family.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter that there is corruption, as intention is what marks the merits of our actions.

If you donate 500 dollars to an orphanage and the manager steals 200 of those dollars, that isn't your problem. You freely and open-heartedly gave to charity. That charity has a problem. The manager has a problem. The mistake is his, not yours. If you find out, you may not want to support that charity in the future, or make your experience public so as to influence a change in the management of that orphanage. Either way, this is no argument to stop giving to orphanages altogether. Similarly, it isn't an argument to give up trying to support sustainable tea production.

The whole concept of "organic" and the certification process that surrounds it has some flaws. At the same time, it's the best we have at the moment. We should support it, help it iron out its problems and use it to educate people towards better quality, environmentally friendly agro-products, including tea. It would be great, though, to transcend the need for "organic" or "certified", in any way—to reach a time when all agro-products are produced without genetic modification or chemicals which harm humans or Nature!

Here at the Hut, we try to remain optimistic and promote positive change in the world. It doesn't really matter why a vendor says they don't carry organic teas, or don't do so exclusively, because if you are actively looking for a reason to give up hope, you'll find one (or many). Furthermore, the honest truth, which they think would lose our respect, is that they don't carry organic teas for financial reasons—either they don't sell as well, aren't as available or don't offer the same profit margins. I, personally, would respect a vendor more if they were open and forthright about the financial motivation behind their unsustainable teas, rather than sugar-coating the issue with pseudo-arguments.

Anyway, it isn't the vendors' responsibility. It's ours. We are the ones who can make a change in global tea production by taking a stand for organic tea. If the tea isn't certified, fine, but is it clean? Clean and lacking any agro-chemicals isn't something that requires a piece of paper to prove. The tea is or isn't produced in a way that is harmful to people and/or Nature. And as you drink more and more teas, you can begin to notice the effects such chemicals have on the tea, especially when they are used heavily.

If all of us start demanding this, the merchants will have to follow the demand, and you will see a rise in organic teas across the board, as well as more informative descriptions that describe the tea's origin, farmer and philosophy. We believe that this is what the intelligent consumer wants. And it leads to a more awakened, connected and compassionate world—one in which tea consumption in California has a positive effect upon a farmer's life in China.



