

TEA WITH ANGELS

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Through this incredible tea practice, I've traveled round the world a few times. My grandpa's trusty medicine box has opened onto countless tea ceremonies, many of which you've attended. And through all the bowls of tea, light green to dark puerh-black, we've shared silence and laughter, life wisdom learned through tea, and forged the bonds of lasting friendship. Each trip is so full of events, workshops and ceremonies that it seems from the outside a lot to bear. But inside there is only more and more enthusiasm. I am doing what I love, following my bliss. And all too often, it leads me to Los Angeles.

It seems far-fetched from a distance, that such a thriving tea tree ever took root in LA, but once you arrive and meet all the illuminated smiles and get hugged a few hundred times, it starts to make sense. Tea is just another aspect of self-cultivation, awakened mind and conscious living so abundant in LA. And amongst the many uplifting attitudes and spiritual seminars, there is a great need for some earthbound connection: grounding forces so seminally a part of tea practice. I've heard a few people say that they find something more authentic and rooted in tea, which is so important in a town that is, at least to a large degree, devoted to show. In the end, people turn to tea because it helps, because it's wonderful to share and for our own individual truth and insights—the secret conversations between our bowls and hearts. You come to the ceremonies for the same reasons I do, though we might articulate them differently, and I show up as host and you guest—at least this time.

After regarding how wonderful the Los Angeles tea community is, I'm compelled to write about the beautiful gardeners who've watered and fertilized this blooming tree for three years now, for it is they who greet me at the airport when I arrive, smile and hug me through the challenges of so many events, workshops and interviews, and then drop me off with tears when it's time to go. There is a very solid tea community in LA, full of bright souls who selflessly donate their time towards the creation of tea spaces and heartfelt sharing of the Leaf. And, ultimately, they are the real reason why tea blossoms in LA, and why the community is lush every time I return.

I realize that many of you have yet to attend any of the events we hold around the world, and are wondering what it is we do (aside from our center here in Taiwan and these magazines/teas). And I also know that many of you already had a relationship to tea before you found us, and are maybe wondering if we are sectarian in any way. Rest assured, we are promoting no such relationship to tea or each other. This community is founded on a tea tradition,

for sure, but we aren't devoted to any doctrine, nor to improving the quality of life for members and not others. There is no inside or outside in our tradition. Therefore, let us first dive into who we are, before addressing what we do.

This tradition is a group of tea lovers connected in three ways: Firstly, we practice the same brewing methodology. That is to say, we brew tea in five ways. We do this because we find the tea world very confusing, and in these modern times there are hundreds of ways of brewing tea. Many traditions have lost connection with the reasons why they brew in a particular way, just as many religions have lost touch with where their beliefs and/or practices originate from historically. There are what you could call external/practical reasons for choosing different brewing methods, like the loss of temperature in one method versus another, for example. There are also internal/spiritual reasons that may motivate our brewing—bringing the bowls/cups to the center to symbolize our oneness as host and guests, for example. We realize that some people might not be concerned with why they brew tea in a particular way. That is understandable. In response to that, we'd say that we aren't asking any of you, or any one else, to brew tea as we do. Succinctly, these are the brewing methods that were taught to us, and they work. If your grandfather passed on a hammer through your father to you, and that hammer worked perfectly fine, chances are you would be satisfied with it. It doesn't matter what kind of hammer your neighbor uses, and different hammers or hammering techniques shouldn't prevent you from doing some carpentry together. I love my tradition because it is mine and it works, in other words.

The second common thread that binds our organization is that we all approach tea primarily as plant medicine and a vehicle for spiritual cultivation—a Dao. Just as our brewing methods aren't exclusive, in the sense that we hope that everyone follows us or that we don't have anything to share with those who brew tea differently, so too is our approach to tea an open one. You could think of it like this: there are many approaches to tea. Some drink tea as a healthy beverage. Some like the sensual pleasure and exotic flavors/aromas; others drink tea for spiritual cultivation. These different approaches to tea are not mutually exclusive. There is no need to place an ugly "or" between them—as in beverage *or* spiritual vehicle. Instead of "or", why not a much healthier "and": tea is a beverage *and* a spiritual vehicle! We celebrate that tea is a delicious drink *and* a tool for self-cultivation. We also sometimes drink tea as a beverage or a hobby, that just isn't our primary orientation to tea. And we aren't interested in changing

Tien Wu serving boiled tea at our garden event

how you, or anyone, approaches tea. Rather, we share our approach freely, and when we're your guests, we share in yours!

Finally, our organization is about community and service. As I mentioned above, so many wonderful people in LA showed up this trip to make all of our events a huge success. They do so freely, with hearts overflowing. We want to foster tea brotherhood/sisterhood, and not just among the tea lovers who use our brewing methods, or who approach tea the way we do, but for everyone. In this tradition, we always say, "We don't learn how to *make* tea, but how to *serve* it." Our aim is to create present, loving, ceremonial tea space for everyone, fostering deeper friendships and even family through tea.

Now that you understand who we are, I have a great analogy for what we do when we host events: Imagine that we were cooks; cooks that only make the same five dishes over and over again. Now, we bring those five dishes out to the public for free, asking for whatever donation you can afford, but perfectly happy to serve the food to you even if you cannot afford to donate anything. You are also free to take as much or as little as you like. Maybe you want to taste just one tomato from one of the dishes. Maybe you want a plate full of just one of the dishes—that's great too. Or perhaps you want to try all five. And then, there are those amongst you who taste all the dishes and are so happy with the food, the atmosphere and the event that you want to learn how we cook these five dishes and how

we host these events. In that case, we have workshops and are more than happy to put you to work helping us serve. It boils down to this: this tradition has something for everyone, whether it is a single bowl of tea we serve for free in parks, markets, events, etc., or a deeper ceremony of many bowls, or even the desire to learn how we make and serve tea—you are welcome to take as much as you like from us; it's free!

In that way, we host large events/parties where we serve tea and create family/social bonds. We also host workshops to teach people our approach and brewing methodology—how we serve tea, in other words. And we also host silent tea ceremonies, as words fall short of tea when it comes to approaching tea as a means of self-cultivation (Dao).

We did a lot of all three of these this time in LA. We had a great music event, with performances by the amazingly handsome Alec Bridges, Paul Livingstone (who shredded the sitar) and our dear brother MJ, who regaled us with bright chants and world rhythms. It was an amazing night. The following day, we hosted tea in a gorgeous garden in Venice, sharing both quiet, ceremonial space that guests visit for three bowls and a more social space to talk and get to know one another while drinking boiled tea or steeped chrysanthemum tea. We also hosted another private party and several workshops to help teach new and old students about our ways of preparing and approaching tea.

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The most exciting aspect of this trip, aside from all the hugs, was that none of the donations were to support our center in Taiwan. 100% of all the donations we collected at these events went towards establishing a center in West LA, which we hope to open in the next two or three months. Our center in LA will continue our overall purpose of awakening harmony between people and Nature, as well as fostering community around tea. It, too, will not be run for profit, but rather as a donation-based service to the local community. Unlike the center in Taiwan, however, our center in LA will not be residential. Instead, we will offer daily ceremonies, weekly tea classes and monthly events. And all are welcome to come and be served or learn how to serve!

The glimmering hope of such an amazing tea space in LA, as well as all the warmth lingering from all your hugs (and Chris Sage's beautiful smile)—all of it left me moist-eyed on the plane home. I am inspired to continue sharing tea and this Way of Tea with others, confident that what we do really does make a difference in the world!



Skylar serving Snow Chrysanthemum tea

