

THE SIXTH BOWL COMMUNITY & SERVICE

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Continuing his discussion of the Eight Bowls of our tradition, Shen aptly discusses community and service. We always say that we are here not to learn how to make tea, but rather to serve it. This bowl arrives at the perfect time, indeed.

Joyously, we receive now the sixth bowl of warming tea. This next bowl invites us to reflect on the tea sessions of long ago... Glancing into its depths we see spiritual communities sitting in circles and passing weathered bowls from hand to hand—*sangha* that lived and worked together and supported each other as an organic unit. Looking up, we take notice of just how intently and carefully this very bowl was placed on the table. We remember the importance of effort and sacrifice, without which this bowl would not lie steaming before us. Though it is true each bowl is the first and last, the next sip reveals a continuation of all those tea sessions long ago, until the present one...

Our tradition is based on service. We don't learn how to *make* tea, but how to *serve* tea. Everyone has a different capacity to serve. In order to be of service, we must also take care of ourselves. To the degree that one is healthy is the degree that one can serve. To strive for personal health, which is an ongoing journey rather than a fixed point, is to strive for an increasing capacity to serve others. That is the only reason to seek mastery of Tea in this tradition. The aim

is to recognize the inherent harmony between guest and host. And where would we be, as the host, without a guest? That's where community comes into play, which is why it is one of the Eight Bowls of Tea *and* one of the three main principles of this tradition. Keep in mind that as a guest at the tea table, you play an important role, for without the guest, whom is the tea to be served? How can students learn to serve tea without guests? In that way, the guest is also of great service!

As I write this article, I do so in the company of my Tea family. As a band of brothers and sisters, we can accomplish more than any one of us alone. And as someone with a great deal of responsibilities on my plate, I bow deeply to these beings before me, without whom I could not accomplish the important tasks required to maintain this tea center and help it thrive. More and more, I marvel at our growing global family and at the things we can accomplish with just a few more sets of hands to help out. Output isn't simply doubled when another person offers their help. Working together is more enjoyable and family-oriented. Accomplishing more in a shorter

period of time is only a byproduct of having more help within a community, not the reason to seek more help. The quality of the work is far more important. This global family can only live and thrive as a unit. No one student or teacher could have accomplished this alone. There is a huge amount of accumulated energy behind this movement...

I'm sometimes asked what it's like to serve so much all the time as a student here at the center. The answer I give is easily understood in discussion, though very challenging to experientially assimilate, especially from a Western perspective where complete dedication to others is not a common practice. I am by no means suggesting that I have the capacity at this point to fully offer myself over to service. I, and everyone else here, still have lots of personal work to do. The ironic thing is that serving others is often the highest form of self-cultivation. Putting others before me resolves all my personal issues, at least for a time. In stepping outside of mind-made obstacles, I then have the space to reflect on the wonders of life. And how nourishing it feels to be a force of service for others. Isn't

that what families are for? However, when trapped in the muck of my own drama, it can seem impossibly challenging at times to lay that muck down for the sake of another. For how can I, in this moment of my “crisis”, help another? But when that day comes, and I find the courage to set down the egoic drama I’ve entrapped myself in, and instead set down a bowl of tea for a sister in need, the real internal work begins. It’s an act of letting go of that which separates me from others. What stopped me from helping another was dropped and replaced by something that brings us closer together.

In those moments of letting go and going out of your way to help someone in need, you have invited this bowl into your life. In extending your hand and offering a bowl of tea in the true spirit of sharing, you have established a connection known all too well to Tea. Never underestimate the power in sharing a simple bowl of tea! It might not be easy at first, and in fact probably requires a little teeth-clenching to do it (putting others first, not making tea!), but as the Buddha inside you awakens, more of these challenges will be overcome and met

with joy. Overcoming a challenge doesn’t necessarily mean getting rid of it either. Sometimes it’s about welcoming it into your life, working with it, and shifting your perspective on the matter to bring about constructive change.

Another important tool for inviting this bowl into your life and thus increasing your capacity to serve is through *dhana*. This means giving away or donating. For me as a student here, that means donating time, energy, money and any resources at my disposal for the sake of this place and the community. Participation and volunteerism are some of the most important forms of *dhana* in this community, especially during these exciting times of change and growth! Even just supporting us through word of mouth and sharing simple bowl tea goes a long way toward an amazing cause! Obviously, being a GTH member is already a great form of *dhana*. It is often recommended to students that we choose the amount of *dhana* we are comfortable offering and then offer a little more on top of that, so that it stings—just a little. In this way, we push ourselves outside of our comfort zones for the sake

of community. The beautiful thing about *dhana* is that it both supports all members of the community now as well as into the future. We give not out of obligation, but out of a desire to share the same experience we had with future generations as well.

One final thing to remember, with respect to communal living and healing is that all those around you act as your mirrors, giving you the most important feedback to gauge your spiritual progress. They will mirror your strong and weak points if you pay careful attention. Bow deeply to them, for they are reflections of aspects of yourself. Should you find in your life abundance, health, laughter, compassion, strength, mental clarity or smiles on the faces of those you meet, then take it for granted that you’re progressing along the way!

In community, we find strength and support, example and leadership. Together, we can achieve much more than any of us alone. GTH is one such shining example of what a strong and supportive group of individuals can accomplish together, nurturing the seeds of awakening, one bowl at a time!