

CIRCLE TOWARDS THE CENTER

Wu De

Now and then, it is important to return to the basics. We plan to cover the Five Basics of Tea Brewing over the course of the next five issues. While these principles also apply to bowl tea, they are primary in gongfu brewing as well.



Last month we began a new series of articles on the Five Basics of Tea Brewing, remembering that the simple and the advanced are just spirals on the same circle. *Advanced techniques are basic techniques mastered.* There is never a time when we graduate from the basics or leave them behind. They are always the foundation of our practice, and it is therefore important to return to them every now and again to renew and refine our understanding. Only in continually checking that the foundation is secure can we safely add another story to the building. In fact, it is smart to thoroughly check the groundwork every time one considers adding another floor—to make sure the structure is sound and can hold the added weight! More often than not, the best tea sessions are held on the ground floor anyway.

Though these five pillars of tea brewing are applicable to all tea practices and brewing methods, they are paramount to gongfu tea. The only difference is that other brewing styles, like leaves in a bowl, end at the Five Basics of Tea Brewing, while gongfu tea, on the other hand, builds on them—exploring more refined techniques and sensitivity as

well. Still, they are as important for a gongfu practice as for any tea practice.

Last month we explored the need to separate the tea space down the middle and do everything on the right side with the right hand, and everything on the left with that hand. This keeps us centered to our guests and to the tea space. It also promotes a more balanced tea brewing, involving both hands and arms, and stemming from the core. Breathing in and out from the center of our being and bringing the tea movements from that space adds a lot of dimension to all tea, most especially gongfu tea, where the movements are more involved and refined. There is a kind of Qi Gong to tea brewing, and bringing the energy up the legs and out through the arms via our center is important to the alchemy of tea brewing, especially as spiritual cultivation. We also talked about not turning our backs to our guests, as well as the practicality of protecting our teaware by not reaching across the table with the opposite hand, thereby putting our teapot in our blind spot when we come back to front and center. That is the most

common way I have seen teapots get knocked over these many years!

Now we can begin to explore the second basic, which is very much based on the first. A lot of movements in tea brewing are circular—not all, but definitely the majority, especially in gongfu tea. The second Basic of Tea Brewing is: *in circular movements, all movements of the left hand are clockwise and all movements of the right hand are counter-clockwise.*

This aspect of tea brewing is almost completely to do with the ergonomics of our bodies. Another, perhaps simpler way of remembering how to do circular movements with each hand is *towards the center.* We move our hands in circles towards the center because it is smoother, cleaner and much more comfortable. When we move either of the arms in outward circles our elbows clack against our bodies and the circular motions become awkward and forced. It is very difficult to move in this way, uncomfortable and far less fluent than spinning towards the center.

The second, deeper reason for moving towards the center when making circular motions pertains to

energy (Qi). When we move in this way, the Qi in our bodies flows differently—from the center (*dan tian*) towards the kettle or pot. If you are more sensitive, you will feel this just by sitting in a chair and spinning your hands in circles towards the center. The difference in energy flow is obvious. Try placing your elbows out and holding something as heavy as a kettle and/or pot in each hand (it's not a good idea to practice fast with teaware, especially at first). Next, spin your hands in outward circles and then switch to circles that come in towards the center—clockwise for the left hand and counter-clockwise for the right. Do you notice the difference in smoothness on a gross level? And can you feel the energetic difference? Does the energy from your breath, from your core, move out your arms in a different way? Is it any wonder that movements in Qi Gong and Tai Chi also often follow this pattern?

The next experiment is, of course, to see what effects this has on your gongfu brewing. We suggest an experiment with just two cups and a kettle. Bring the water to a boil and lay out two identical gongfu cups. For this experiment, some wider, more open cups may be better. They will make pouring

easier, and the water will also cool down quicker. Since it is coming right from the kettle, the water may be hotter than you are used to. Like with most gongfu tea experiments, it is best to use simple porcelain cups—plain white if possible... Hold the kettle in your off-hand. Hold it with your index finger running down the handle, which offers more control and guidance. Using the index finger as a guide—gently pointing down towards the spout-facing curve of the handle—will allow for more support and precision in pouring. Remember what we have discussed in previous issues about *placing* the water as opposed to *pouring* it into the cups. That will be especially important in this experiment. *Place* the water into the first cup in gentle circles that spin outwards, away from the center. Then, *place* the water in the second cup in circular motions that move in the correct direction according to the Five Basics of Tea Brewing—*towards the center*. Try to only pour on the walls of the cup, so that the water flows gently down into each cup.

Even if your cups are wider, and therefore cool down faster, you still may need to wait a bit for them to cool down if you are sensitive to hot

water. Otherwise, you might burn your mouth. It is actually never a good idea to blow on tea, as it distorts the energy, flavor and aroma. For the purpose of this experiment, that is especially important. When the water is cool enough, hold each cup in one hand and try drinking from each one in turn. Do you notice a difference in the smoothness and consistency of the water? Is one more or less structured?

No matter what your results with the water experiment, you can try practicing gongfu tea by pouring water from the kettle or tea from the teapot in outward and inward-facing circles. See which direction feels more natural and fluent, and what, if any, effect it has on your tea. In fact, you can repeat the above experiment with tea, pouring from the teapot into two cups—one for each direction of circular motion. If you do so, be sure to use your elbow more, allowing the circular movement, and thus the pouring, to come from there. As usual, we are excited to hear about your insights: globalteahut@gmail.com

