

# LIVING TEA

Wu De

*In these magazines, there is no single term you will see more often than 'Living Tea'. It is a central teaching to all we know, practice and promote about Tea. In this excerpt, adapted from Wu De's new book, we learn about the six characteristics of Living Tea. In that way, our tea journey takes off on the right foot, and we can resource this important teaching anytime.*

We call it “Living Tea” for obvious reasons: it lights you up, and your every cell feels alive, moving to the sway of the Tea dance. What we mean by Living Tea, though, is *real Tea*—Tea that is grown in the old ways. The first ever puerh advertisement to be translated into English had a bit of language in it that is actually quite deep, and we keep an antique copy in the center for that reason. It says: “This Tea is far more powerful than anything made by the hands of man...” In our tradition, there is Living Tea and... well, *not* Living Tea. And that is the most important criteria for choosing tea, though the issue is a bit more complicated than that, as we will see later on...

## *Seed-propagated*

There are **six** main characteristics of Living Tea, each as important as the other. The first is that it is *seed-propagated*. Tea is a sexual plant, which means that it is

cross-pollinated. A tremendous amount of natural energy goes into the creation of a Tea seed, including bugs and forest, sun and sky. Each one carries great energy within it. And no two Tea seeds are alike. They will each produce a completely unique Tea tree, which is why Tea has done so well traveling to different climates. If you plant a thousand seeds, the chances that one of them will survive are high. Unfortunately, very little Tea in the world is seed-propagated. The reason, of course, is industry and the commoditization of Tea. Sadly, Tea faces many of the problems that all agricultural products are haunted by. Most Tea plantations use cuttings from a tree, planted to produce another. They are in essence clones. Producers do this to achieve a uniformity of flavor. Also, with a few hundred, or even thousands of different trees, all with different needs, the farmer would potentially have a lot more work to do.

It took millennia for trees like Tea to develop sexual cross-fertil-

ization. It is also tremendously difficult for such trees to fertilize one another, since the mates cannot move towards embrace the way that animals and people can. As a result, plants have developed magnificent ways of fertilizing each other, enticing insects to pollinate them, using the wind, etc. There is a reason for all this. Carl Sagan said that the evolution from asexual to sexual reproduction on this planet was as significant as the beginning of life itself, as it allows for all the creative power in Nature to assert itself in such myriad forms. There is something deep and powerful missing when a plant is not allowed to cross-fertilize. The variety in Nature is magic, just as in humans. Every tree is then different. Sure, they share some similarities due to common genetic heritage and similar terroir (climate, soil, etc.), but like people they each have their own medicine, their own perspective, experience and wisdom.

The difference in power and healing between seed-propagated and cloned Tea is obvious. There



are essentially two main varieties of Tea trees: what are called “big leaf trees”, which are the original, oldest Tea trees (which we’re drinking this month). They have a single trunk, grow very tall and have roots that grow downwards. As Tea moved north it evolved into “small leaf trees”, which are more bush-like. They have many trunks and roots that grow outwards. In fact, the leaves got smaller and smaller as Tea moved north, whether naturally or carried by man, until you get to Japan where the leaves are so small they look like needles after they’re rolled. Now, big leaf tea trees can live thousands of years. The oldest one we’ve dated is 3,500 years old! It is about seven people around (I kissed it, and once for you). There are probably older ones out there, or at least were in the past. Small leaf tea trees can live hundreds of years, and some are many centuries old. Here’s the punch line: The clones on plantations typically live thirty to fifty years only. And more than a few farmers have told me

that they aren’t living as long anymore, sometimes as few as fifteen to twenty years, mostly because they are ripped out when their yield decreases.

There are several species of birds that love to eat Tea seeds. They are rich and oily and full of nutrients. Farmers make cooking oil out of them. It’s delicious. Recently, farmers have told me that after the second generation of cloning, the birds will no longer eat the tea seeds anymore.

### ***Room to Grow***

The second key factor in Living Tea is ***room to grow***. All living things need ample room to grow. How could you be healthy in a small box, or worse yet, trapped in a crowd of people for the rest of your life? Tea trees are no different. They need space between trees to extend their roots. In Taiwan, there are seed-propagated gardens that were abandoned for seventy

or eighty years in Sun Moon Lake (Do you remember we drank that tea together months ago?). When people started tending them again, the tea trees had organized themselves—and not in nice neat rows, convenient for maximizing output. They knew that certain parts of the land were more nutrient-dense and could support more trees in a cluster, while other places didn’t have as rich of soil and the trees needed more space, more roots and room between each other. Nature knows how to organize Herself, and was doing so long before we arrived. It’s not broken or fallen, and our meddling doesn’t fix anything.

Tea doesn’t just need lateral room to grow, but also room to grow up towards the sun and extend its crown. This is essential, for a plant biologist once told me that every plant has an unknown ratio between its roots and crown. We can’t measure that ratio, but it’s there (actually we could, but it would be different for every tree). And when you cut the crown, the roots will shrink

accordingly. We've often discussed in this magazine that Tea is such a special plant because it has a very complex, deep root system that absorbs energy (Qi) from the mountains where it grows, bestowing many unique trace elements onto us.

On commercial plantations, the trees are all crammed together so close they are competing with each other for the limited resources of the mountain. And then they are pruned, never allowed to grow up strong and healthy. The reason is, of course, to increase yield by making picking easier. As with other agriculture products, it's usually a quantity over quality methodology. This sharp contrast is felt not only in the fields, but in the bowl as well.

## Biodiversity

The third aspect of Living Tea is *biodiversity*. There is an infinite amount of connections and correlations between all the living things in any environment, and as we are learning to our detriment, meddling with certain elements of the web affects every living creature on the web, including ourselves. And this is precisely what Tea is supposed to be helping us to heal, as we awaken our harmony to Nature.

There is a famous man in Japan named Masanobu Fukuoka who should be canonized, in my opinion. He did a tremendous amount for Asia, and the world, teaching people sustainable agricultural techniques, creating organic certification and many other important projects. He studied biology in college, and went to spend his life serving Mother Nature. He has a quote about biodiversity that I like. He said, and I am paraphrasing, "When I was in college, I had a professor who always used to say that philosophy and religion have no place in the world of science. One day, years later, I was walking in a field of barley and I realized that *science has no place in the world of barley!*" There are just

too many connections, from the weather to the insects and from the insects to the microbes—too many factors for us to know how they all relate to each other, except to say, "This Tea is far more powerful than anything made by the hands of man..."

I heard a story that somewhere in the Great Plains the Indians used to say that 'When the prairie dog barks, it rains'. When the white people came, they thought that was superstitious nonsense and started killing what they considered to be pests: they dig up your lawn, and potentially can cause damage to the foundation of a house;

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—Masanobu Fukuoka

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and they have no apparent role in the local ecology! When the Natives warned them that if they killed the prairie dogs, it wouldn't rain, they laughed. Sure enough, after they'd killed all the prairie dogs, the land grew more and more desert like. As it turns out, the soil in that region needs heavy aeration, without which the grass and trees can't grow. No grass or trees and no precipitation! The prairie dogs were aerating the soil, and their role *was* key. In fact, if you are wise, you'll see that the *prairie dogs are the rain!*

The relationships between the insects and the snakes, the soil and the bug poop, the microbes and the fungi are just as complex as the make-up of our bodies—maybe

even more so. And there's no super computer(s) on earth that can come close to the complexity of a zygote, organizing millions of cells as the animal forms more and more complex systems in the womb. Furthermore, even if we could figure out how to control all the facets of an environment for agriculture, why would we want to? Nature has been doing it way longer, and always provides better for us. This mysterious web of interconnection creates an ineffable difference between Living Tea and plantation Tea.

## Chemical-free

The fourth characteristic of Living Tea is the most obvious of the six, and the easiest to discuss: Living Tea is, of course, grown *without the use of any agrochemicals*. The triad of pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers are bad for the environment and the health of the farmers and consumers. The tea trees that survive from chemical fertilizers do not receive nutrients from the mountain. They are like patients in a hospital surviving on intravenous lines—take away the fertilizers and they die. Since tea is grown at the top of mountains, these chemicals also run down and harm other ecologies besides the farm. And included in their poisonous effects are the lives of the farmers and their families, who are exposed to these chemicals in heavier doses. Many of the greatest proponents for organic farming are the loudest advocates of organic farming because they or their families were harmed by agrochemicals. Such tea is not sustainable and not good for the future prosperity of this planet, not to mention that it defeats the point of Tea as plant medicine.

## No Irrigation

The fifth characteristic of Living Tea is that it *not be irrigated*.

When you irrigate tea trees, you can have more of them on a plot of land, but they never reach down deep with their roots. Instead, the roots stay near the surface. By not irrigating, and letting them find water naturally, they will dig down deeper—as far as they can, depending on the mountain and the rock bed beneath them. Some trees will die, but this will help with the ‘room to grow’ factor mentioned above. The ones that survive will have deeper and stronger root systems, which means more minerals and energy from the mountains. Some tea trees can dig roots very

deep, down to the geothermal heat of the mountain, drawing rich minerals, water and heat up into their systems, which of course produces much more medicinal tea leaves...

### ***Relationship***

The sixth and final characteristic of Living Tea has to do with the ***conversation between people and Tea***. After all, as we’ve discussed so often, Tea was made to be human. It responds to us. In Chinese, the character for Tea has the radical ‘man’ in it, suggesting that Tea as we drink it

is a dialogue between Man and the Plant Kingdom, represented by the radicals for ‘grass’ or ‘plant’ above and ‘wood’ below. The nature of that conversation is therefore incredibly important to the quality and life of a tea. Is it about money and greed? Is it about love and healing? Does the farmer even talk to the trees at all? Is there respect in their conversations? These are the vital questions when creating a so-called “living” or “dead” tea. If you asked a real lover of Tea when he picks his tea, he would say: “When it is ready to be picked.” The amount is also up to Nature.

### ***Living Tea is about:***

- I. Seed-propagation***
- II. Room to Grow***
- III. Biodiversity***
- IV. Chemical Free***
- V. No Irrigation***
- VI. Relationship***



In Yunnan, there are 3,500-year-old cave paintings of people making offerings to Tea trees. The people wait with grateful and open arms beneath the Tea trees, bowing and with reverence taking what Nature gives willingly. Nowadays, however, we busy ourselves telling Nature what we want. The plantation owner demands that the land give him 500 kilograms a year, and he won't settle for less. If the trees don't produce, he simply tears them out and replaces them with other clones. And of course, Mother Earth gives and gives to her selfish sons and daughters, giving in love Her last drops of life—even if it means Her own death!

The agriculture problems we face in the world are easiest understood in an analogy that will take us back to our English grammar lessons in high school. I know it's funny, but bear with me... If you remember, there are countable and uncountable nouns in English. Countable nouns have a singular and a plural—one duck, two ducks, one bowl, five bowls, etc. And uncountable nouns have no singular or plural, like "water" or "flour". Traditional farming was always countable. In the small, aboriginal villages of Yunnan, for example, the people keep pigs (plural, countable). During the day, the pigs wander about the village and at night they come home. And no one ever argues over whose pigs are whose, because they know their pigs (plural, countable). They know them by appearance: "The one with the white spot on the shoulder is mine"; and they know them by personality as well: "The one that always sits up on his rump is mine." (All real examples, by the way.) But nowadays, pig farming is uncountable: It is just a huge room of uncountable *pork*! Nobody knows or cares where one pig begins and the next one ends. There is no respect for the individual beings (plural, countable), just a mass of uncountable *flesh*. Of course, Tea also suffers in this way.

Traditionally, Tea trees were allowed to grow up and grow old. They provided medicine for generations of people. Imagine how you would feel about a cluster of apple trees in your family's backyard if they had provided all the food, shelter and clothing for your family over the last fifteen generations! If your last name was Wu, you'd better believe those trees would be more Wu than you are! They fed your great-great-great-great—grandfather, after all. Many of the ancient trees were given names, and often worshipped. For the first few thousand years of Tea drinking, Tea wasn't even domesticated, so finding it was always about seeking out wild Tea made by Nature.

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Respect for the Earth and Nature, and a desire to treat the trees as givers rather than commodities is an important part of what makes up Living Tea. Raping Nature for profit can't create medicine to align us with Nature.

Living Tea is seed-propagated, has room to grow, biodiversity, no irrigation and a proper relationship with those who tend the trees. It all sounds incredible. Unfortunately, Living Tea also has one serious problem. Do you see it?

The problem is that there simply isn't enough of it. If all the Tea in the world were Living Tea, there wouldn't be enough. Millions of people would go without tea. I don't

want that. I hope you don't, either. And that means compromise. This is, in the end, the age of compromise. (If you didn't want to compromise, you wouldn't have incarnated in 2015!)

Compromise means we also have to have some plantation tea alongside Living Tea. It means less room to grow, some pruning, irrigation, less biodiversity (though hopefully still some); it also sometimes means cloning. But that's where we must draw the line! We can't compromise any more than that. The plantation has to be organic. Full stop! When the trees are put too close together and in competition with one another, they can't afford to have other plants around, so most industrial plantations kill all the undergrowth (and rather than picking it, they use chemical weed-killers, of course). Most insects don't prefer to eat Tea, but will if you kill all the other plants in the area. And then in come the pesticides. Tea likes loose, gravel-y soil, but the pesticides compact the soil, which means chemical fertilizers.

A more important issue related to inorganic tea is this: how can you sit in a nice Tea room and connect to Nature when the thing you're using to connect was made in a way that has harmed Nature? Even if you do connect, the only message you'll get is, "Help!" All of the medicinal value of Tea is gone when it is grown out of harmony with Nature, Spirit and life on this earth. Tea helps flush out the toxins from our bodies, and more importantly our hearts, and always has done that for people. But how do you flush toxins with toxins?

What was the reason we said we wanted to compromise and have some plantation tea anyway? That's right, so that everyone can have tea. Inorganic tea doesn't fulfill that, however, and so isn't a compromise worth making. Inorganic tea produces a larger quantity of tea in space, but not in time. It provides us with a huge yield now, but it isn't sustainable. Eventually, such planta-



tions will go fallow. When I said I was willing to compromise so that everyone could have tea, I meant *everyone*, and that includes future generations of tea drinkers. I want my children's children to have Tea as well!

It is important for us to remember that complaining isn't a solution. The farmers are the first victims of these chemicals. One of Taiwan's greatest proponents of organic Tea does what he does because his father died of pesticide poisoning and his brother has cancer. He was spared because he was too young to

work on the farm at the time. Now he grows Living Tea. Similar stories can be found elsewhere, too. We move forward through inclusion, not exclusion, through education and positivity, rather than negativity. Help promote what's positive and learn from what's negative, in other words. Obviously, the word "organic" and organic certification have some problems. Not all organic farmers can afford certification, for example. But such a system and ideology is the best solution we have so far. As more people become healthier and awoken to a harmony with

Nature, Self and each other, we'll be able to create new and better agricultural systems that recognize our connection to the land.

