



Gong Fu Cha

Tea Tips with Master Ling Ping Xiang



Have you ever noticed that the tea at the shop isn't the same when you get home? A lot of us began to recognize the so-called "gong-fu" of tea when the teacher or master made the same tea taste and feel so much better than we could. Some of the first teas I bought were some nice aged Wuyi *Yancha* and when I got home I thought the shop-owner had switched teas on me because they tasted nothing at all like they had in the store. I returned a few days later with a sample from the bag I had bought and asked the teacher to brew it. I was amazed to find that once again it tasted spectacular—the very impetus for buying it in the first place. For a long time thereafter, I floated along on the misunderstanding that making such superb tea was about technical mastery. I followed all the details of the process with a careful eye, trying to measure and recreate them at home. It took me a few years to realize that very little of what goes into our tea is in technique. Of course, it plays a part, but even two masters will make the same tea taste completely different. I came to understand that making the best tea had nothing to do with temperature, amount of leaf, etc. and everything to do with who's doing the brewing

As much as the water, the leaf or teaware, the person brewing influences the cup you drink. A great antique Yixing can do a lot for a tea, as can a silver kettle, but no more than the one who is brewing. If there is any doubt, take the same leaf, pot and water to a few friends' houses and you'll be amazed by how different each cup is. And the more sensitive you are, the more apparent these discrepancies become.

The whole process of brewing tea is flowing through the one at the center of the session. It is his or her mind that scoops the leaf, gauges the water temperature. It will be them that pours the water from the kettle. Is the stream swift or soft? Does it flow smoothly? The whole process is one of grace and harmony. Getting the best out of any given tea is a mastery, requiring an almost alchemical harmony between the teaware, leaf, water and the one bringing them all together. And that is why my tea will never be as rewarding as Master Ling's. It isn't about years of skill. It isn't about technique. It is all about the vessel through which the tea session flows.



Comfort and Relaxation

I sat down with Master Ling and asked him about all this and he had some good advice. He said that enjoying a fine cup of tea requires a lot of ingredients beyond just the leaf, water, teaware or even preparation parameters. He said that the company we share our tea with is equally important. Master Ling recognized that people have chemistry and either work together or don't, which is why you sometimes meet someone and like or dislike them from the first sip. He suggested that we find tea companions who not only "work with our chemistry, but also make our tea more enjoyable." He said that for him this means that they come for the tea, not for political or religious debates and/or other social activities. "If they love tea as much as me, that's a good start." He also mentioned that the best tea companions are people around whom we can be ourselves. If we have to be upright, formal or put on airs in any other way, the tea session will be inferior. It is best to drink tea with close friends who love tea as much as us; people who relax us and bring us joy. This doesn't mean every tea session will be like this, but it's an ideal to seek out. "There is wisdom in drinking tea with those we'd rather not be with, too...but we were talking about *enjoying* a fine cup of tea." He laughed. Those that come for the tea are much better companions.

Master Ling went on to discuss that the best tea is made by someone who is completely relaxed. We shouldn't be hung up on details of the tea, but comfortable and confident in our abilities. He said we should let the parameters take care of themselves, admitting that this takes some time to learn as well as a familiarity with the tea one is making. "Being relaxed isn't just about our company", he went on to say. "After all, being truly relaxed means being peaceful in any situation." Master Ling advised me to wear comfortable clothes and sit comfortably, in a quiet and simple tea space. He said that we could play some music or do a bit of meditation



in order to relax. He said the brewing process is a bit like Tai Chi—the Qi in the body must flow smoothly and unobstructed. "Pay attention to your posture when making tea. Sit up straight. Make sure you use your elbow and wrist for pouring water and tea from the kettle and teapot. Don't put any strain on your shoulder by lifting your arm too high." He demonstrated comfortable and uncomfortable pouring postures, suggesting that we find our own method so long as it is smooth and comfortable, relaxed.

When drinking, Master Ling recommends closing the eyes for a second or two. "Go inside yourself. Truly experience the tea. There is no need to talk or think, to write or review." He said that evaluation happens in the mind, while the tea is speaking to the senses. If we listen, the tea will tell us its story, its quality and heritage. We needn't search for words while we drink. As long as we fully experience the tea, finding words

to describe it afterwards will be easy. "To truly enjoy a great cup of tea, we should be there with the tea—not off thinking about the past or future...even what we will say about the tea itself." He said that there are many subtleties in tea available to us starting with aroma and flavor, many varieties in fact. Then there's the "*cha yun*" or sensations in the mouth and throat; and finally the Qi in the body, which will begin moving from head to toe when we drink fine tea.

What's in a Fine Cup of Tea

Thanking Master Ling for the advice on how to stay relaxed and brew tea comfortably, I asked him about what he thought made a good tea. In the end, a lot of us aren't as sensitive as him, and we don't have a master at home to brew tea for us each day, so we must resort

"Orchid Dream" By Jeffrey Mcgourty

A quiet and deep mind will make transcendent tea. Long ago I would have thought the idea absurd, but having the fortune to drink tea with people like Master Ling has opened my eyes. There is something way beyond sensual enjoyment in the tea he brews—perhaps wisdom. Alternatively, I have had tea brewed by businessmen that tastes of metaphoric coin. The fact that their mind is on money is there in the brew. After all it passed through them. The concept of the tea master is a bit like cooking: everyone on Earth feels that their own mother is the best cook since she makes food out of love for them, without asking anything in return. Making tea is a bit like that. If your mind is in a hurry, your tea will be hurried. If its brewed by a friend it just feels better, like our mothers' food tastes better. And similarly, teas made by a master like Paul Ling, carry with them Zen-like insights in the expanding breadth of each sip.



I asked Master Ling if the brewing could affect the qualities he described and his answer was simply, “Of course, especially for certain kinds of tea.” Delicate teas, like Wuyi *Yancha*, are more sensitive and improper brewing can affect the tea more than with other varieties. I personally think that a master can bring some of these qualities to a tea that may not have them on its own, and I said as much to Master Ling. He smiled.

As always, time spent with Master Ling is as rewarding as any novice tea drinker such as myself could wish for. I learned a lot about how to approach my tea, and reaffirmed other things that I understood long ago, at least intellectually. It’s one thing to know that a calm and centered mind brews the best tea, but it’s a whole other mountain to be able to turn the mind off and bring such stillness and quietude to the tea, especially amidst the noise of life. Amazingly, Master Ling seems able to achieve this even in a crowded, noisy room or when brewing tea for a large group of chattering people—a few quiet moments between steepings and the tea still tastes of wisdom (The picture to the right shows Master Ling pausing for a few moments of peace while tea steeps for a noisy crowd of thirty people sitting in a large and boisterous tea expo. However, looking at him, one might think he was alone in quiet.)

I drink tea all the time, but never seem to see past the dark sorrel depths where the liquor is deepest, but I can’t think of a better pastime in this life than trying to sip my way to the bottom of it all.

The Leaf

to asking experts such as Master Ling for their opinion while we develop our own discrimination. He chuckled, but went on to discuss what he thought made a tea great: He said that a good tea doesn’t need any commentary, really. “In talking about fine teas, however, we can say that they splash up onto the upper palate immediately. They make themselves present right away.” He said that a good tea should have no off-notes. After splashing onto the upper palate, a fine tea slides down the throat smoothly. The liquor should have a smooth and soft consistency. It should make our throat comfortable and leave our mouth moist. “The best teas make us salivate, leaving the thirst quenched and mouth comfortable.” He also said that a great tea will linger on the breath for a long time, returning the aroma to our noses again and again. Great teas also make our stomach, and eventually the rest of our body, feel relaxed and comfortable. They smell, taste and feel good, in other words.

