



Gong Fu Tea Tips

THE HUMAN ELEMENT, PART I:

—POSTURE—

“Within the character for tea is man”, our master often repeats. It’s his way of emphasizing that the people are the most important aspect of brewing gong fu tea. It helps to have great teaware and tea, but it is the people who brew it and experience it. Of course, the depth and connection one has with the Dao lends itself to the tea, which is why tea has long been a means of communicating insight. Nonetheless, we asked Sifu if there were any practical human elements worth discussing here. When you make tea a practice, of course, it is a part of an overall spiritual lifestyle and therefore, every aspect of one’s life will affect the tea. Indeed, even in a casual cup, the weather, temperature, humidity, the last day’s diet and drink, your emotional state, etc. all affect the tea. But are there any human elements that can be practiced during brewing? Skills that can be discussed and applied to gong fu tea? It turns out there is one of particular importance: posture.

Posture plays a huge role in anything meditative. There are schools of Zen that consider the proper meditative posture to be enlightenment itself, and that just by resting in that posture the Way is achieved. Whether you agree with that or not, there’s no denying the role posture plays in all our activities, including tea preparation.

A proper posture is one of dignity, supporting the tranquility that you’re trying to brew. For that reason, the back must be straight. Meditation teachers often suggest that you imagine your body is holding up the heavens and supported deeply by the earth—root yourself downwards and attach yourself upwards. It often helps to sit cross-legged—half or full-lotus—on the floor. Just moving your tea to the floor might make a huge difference in the experience, in fact. At least, you should sit up straight. Slouching is always

associated with mental/emotional dysfunction to some extent. Dignified people never slouch. The mind works best when you're sitting upright, which is why teachers the world over have always demanded that students sit. When you read while lying down, for example, you fall asleep quickly. Sit up straight, close your mouth and breath naturally through your nose as you prepare your tea.

Try making a few different cups. You could even pour three from the same pot. Drink one sitting upright in a chair; then, drink the second sitting cross-legged or half/full-lotus on the floor; finally, take the third to the sofa and slouch back when drinking. What was the difference? How was the experience different? Which was richer and more rewarding to you?



Practitioners of tai chi and/or kung fu will know of the importance of allowing our internal Qi to flow through our activities. Chinese brush artists and calligraphers also stress this. Recognizing the flow of Qi through the one brewing the tea, and then into the ones who consume it is a part of the reason why the same tea prepared with the same water and teaware by two different people tastes different. This is also another reason to sit up straight, as a lot of our Qi is flowing through the torso/spine and keeping the back straight allows the current to vibrate more smoothly.

Another very relevant aspect of posture to look out for when preparing your tea gong fu is the position of the arm, elbow, wrist, hand and even fingers. The shoulder is the most important area, as it can pinch off the Qi very easily. Try raising your elbow—like a duck's wing—and find the point at which the shoulder pinches. When pouring water from the kettle remember to never raise the elbow above that point. Try pouring two pots from below and above the pinch and see what the difference is.

You should also pay attention to the wrist when handling your Yixing pot. The wrist and fingers can also ease or hinder the flow of Qi down into the tea. Try using an empty teapot and moving your wrist around to find the ideal places. You'll know which angles are comfortable and smooth and which aren't. If you are uncomfortable when pouring water from the kettle, or steeped tea from the pot, you will rush. Not only that, but your mind will be in a state of agitation, which will perhaps mar the tea more than the posture ever could. For that reason, it is better to choose a kettle that is of a comfortable weight with good balance; the same for teapots, which are usually small for this and other reasons. If you need to use a bigger teapot, because there are more guests, you can always pour with two hands.

The height, distance and stream from which you pour the water and steeped tea all have a tremendous effect on the liquor and the experience. Different teas require pouring from different heights and in different ways. Usually, greener, lighter teas respond well to a pour from higher up—perhaps adding oxygen to the water. This is especially useful in the first couple steepings, as the leaves are awakening. Try pouring in a circular motion, especially in the second steeping in order to get the opening leaves back into balance, since they will have scrunched up against the spout of the



teapot. Darker teas, on the other hand, usually respond well to higher temperatures so it is often better to pour from closer to the pot, though the motion is the same.

One of the first things we noticed about the several masters we learn from is that the water from the kettle always takes on a certain quality as it pours out into the teapot: It flows smooth and soft, appearing to almost float gracefully into the mouth of the pot. This distinction is very difficult to describe until you have in fact seen it. You might also say that it looks as if the water is all together, smoothly without any disjointed angles or roughness of any kind—almost as if a single, transparent cloth were hanging from the kettle to the pot. When we asked, they all unanimously responded that it was in the posture of the back and arm, and the flow of Qi down through the kettle and into the pot.

Why not try pouring from a few different angles and heights to see what effect it has on your tea? Circle clockwise and then counterclockwise. Is there any difference? Try to smooth out the water, allowing it to enter the pot softly, quietly. Are you able to achieve the silky flow of a master? And what difference does that have on the tea?

When pouring the steeped tea from the Yixing pot into the cups, you should keep the spout close to the cups and not pour from too high. Try keeping the stream against the edges of the cups, rather than pouring directly into the pool of tea liquor itself. This prevents the tea from bubbling and keeps the tea smoother in the mouth. See if you notice the difference.

One of the first things we were taught to focus on in meditation and tea preparation both was posture. At the tea house, the differences in age and stature of the many guests often means a combination of tables and tatami; but our masters have always suggested that, if possible, we brew tea on the floor at home: promoting mindfulness and tranquility. Try using the same fundamentals you would in meditation—straight spine, closed mouth, maybe tongue on the roof of your mouth, etc.—and see what effect it has on the overall enhancement of the tea experience. The differences in the flavor, aroma and mouth sensations may be too subtle for you to recognize, but in the least everyone will be able to rate the overall session itself. You can also follow some of our suggestions with regards to pouring, both water from the kettle and the tea into teacups.

Experimenting with the human aspect of tea preparation is free and can often enhance your experience of tea greatly. By concentrating on the most

important aspects of a tea gathering—the host and guests—you may find all kinds of new and important elements in tea preparation that you hadn't before. In that way, you are progressing from the gross to the subtle, and learning not just about the differences in tea, but also your mind.

THE LEAF



