

GLOBAL TEA HUT

國際茶亭

TEA & TAO MAGAZINE

July 2022



CHAXI

PART II



PLUM RAIN

In this issue, we return to the topic of chaxi, which is such a rich practice, adding dimension of creativity, enjoyment and insight to our tea practice. We asked the tea community to write about their chaxi practice and the ways it has changed their tea drinking and their lives.

Love is
changing the world
bowl by bowl

FEATURES

08 THE ART & PRACTICE OF CHAXI

by Wu De (無的)

27 A STORY OF THREE CHAXI

by Andjelka Jankovic

33 EVERY CHAXI IS PERFECT

by Frederik Wallin

37 CREATING A TEA SPACE

by Raneta Coolakova

47 ALLOWING NATURE IN

by Matthew Grohne

49 SIMPLICITY THROUGH CHAXI

by Shen Su (聖素)



49



27



08



37

TRADITIONS

03 TEA OF THE MONTH

"Plum Rain" 2022 Green Tea
Pingling, Taiwan

53 TEA WAYFARER

Polina Kallas, Estonia

梅雨



recycled & recyclable



Soy ink

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From the editor

In July, we are passing over the apex of the summer and the middle of the year. For most of us, this means hot weather and more time spent outdoors. As we are still in the fire element season, it is rare for us to enhance this fiery nature with woody teas. For us, this time of year is all about watery teas to balance the fire. This means lots of fresh green tea, lightly-oxidized oolongs and young sheng teas as well. These teas all arrive in May and June for us, so the timing is perfect. Our Tea of the Month, Plum Rain, is a perfect example of the cooling type of teas we love to drink at this time of year, which coincides with high humidity here in Taiwan. We love Liu Bao tea, which is famous for its ability to expel dampness in the body. Workers in the humid mines in Malaysia wouldn't work for mine companies that didn't offer Liu Bao tea. During the height of summer, we tend towards slightly younger Liu Bao like Beneath the Pines, which is from the early 2000s, as opposed to our special, older teas. These seem to have the right overall balance of removing dampness with a slight woodiness. Occasionally, an older tea in the summer is still great, of course.

For a few years now, we have had a long-term plan to create some tea textbooks. We hope to create a whole series, including brewing techniques and perhaps even one for each of the Seven Genres of tea (probably starting with oolong tea). We also want to create one for the Classics of Tea series we have been translating and annotating for these issues over the years. We have decided that the first in the series of these books will be about Bowl Tea. We have all the material now and just need to think about how we want to design the book. (Any book designers drinking tea out there please contact us!) I hope that the material comes together into a series of books that helps tea lovers in their journey and improves our understanding of tea as we all learn and grow together. If you have any ideas or questions about these books, feel free to reach out.

It feels like travel will begin again this year or next, and we will start hosting tea gatherings, retreats and lessons around the world. I believe sharing tea will play a role in healing the world of all the trauma we have experienced collectively over these last few years. Tea reminds me that the secret to wisdom, insight and healing is listening, compassion, empathy, love and mercy. There is an old Zen saying, "With great understanding comes great love." The wise are loving and the loving are wise. The sage knows oneness in the heart, and therefore cares for the other as the self. When we return to the calmness before the mind ripples, we can practice compassionate listening. Tea helps with this. A tea space is an open, friendly and hospitable one, where we allow people to be themselves and practice hearing each other. As opposed to mental defensiveness, barriers and constrictions, convincing, persuading or confronting, we can

practice being present and allowing the world to have more space for difference and for tolerance. As we listen to the tea, to its flavors, aromas, sensations and energy, we learn to listen to our own bodies, to Nature and to others. That compassionate space, filled with loving-kindness, can heal worlds.

In this issue, we return to the topic of chaxi (茶席). "Chaxi" literally means "tea stage," and refers to the preparation for tea, the decoration of the space and choice of tea and teaware, as well as the ambience, including incense and music. It can also include the session itself and even cleaning up afterwards—there is a lot to discuss, in other words. I did my best to write up a complete guide to the art and practice of chaxi for this issue, focusing on the intention, values and aesthetics of the art, as well as some practical advice based on my limited experience practicing chaxi for some years. I have found that including a chaxi practice into my tea has not only improved my tea, it has also changed my life, expanding my aesthetics, creativity and appreciation for tea. I have also learned some very valuable lessons from the art of chaxi that have greatly impacted my state of mind and my relationship to Tea, Nature and others.

This issue, we asked some people in the community to discuss the ways that practicing chaxi, as part of their tea practice, has changed their lives. We have a whole issue of inspiring works on the relevance of chaxi and the aesthetics of tea. Including chaxi practice in a life of tea can be transformative and improve not only our tea, but our lives. Tea is a living art—a beauty we can walk through, touch and taste. We can become the beauty we practice in tea, living our art from the heart to the tea space and from the tea space to the heart.



—Further Reading—

This month, it is definitely worth rereading the first chaxi issue, December 2019. It includes some wonderful articles about the art and practice of chaxi. The flower arranging issue from October 2020 may also add some useful context to this issue, since we often use flowers in our chaxi arrangements.

TEA OF THE MONTH



Over the course of this month, we will be returning to the topic of chaxi, learning to prepare our tea space—to clean and decorate and choose all the supporting elements that go into making tea occasions special for our guests. Whether the session is fun and promotes socializing through tea and its inherent hospitality or more formal, meditative and ceremonial, we learn to make the occasion unique and beautiful. We wanted a simple, bright and clean tea to drink this month, as that is the spirit of a chaxi practice. Of course, we wanted it to be seasonal as well. Through a stroke of fortuity, Master Yu San He (余三和) offered to share some of his magical green tea with us all, and this gift represents everything tea and chaxi practice are about: the abundance of Nature shared with gratitude and love. We called this tea “Plum Rain” because this year’s Plum Rains were the strongest they have been in many decades, providing the abundant waters that made this May 2022 spring green tea what it is.

Master Yu San He’s farm is named “Respect for Great Nature (尊敬大自然).” It is located in Pinglin township, about a half-hour’s drive east from downtown Taipei. However, once you’re there, it’s hard to believe that it’s so close to the bustling city. It seems to be another world, with beautiful rivers and stunning views down green mountain roads. Traveling there is like stepping back in time to a wilder Taiwan of five hundred years ago.

Like us, Mr. Yu is a meditator and a vegetarian. He’s a very rare kind of tea farmer, too. From the first, he shines with a kind of directness, looking you right in the eyes in a way shier Taiwanese won’t, and there’s kindness in those eyes as well. He’s quick to laughter, like any healthy person, but there’s also a solid foundation of quiet pride and confidence that comes with following Nature’s calling to be a responsible steward of the Earth. It’s so great to have a genuine relationship with this man and his tea gardens.

The land around Pinglin is beautiful. This area lies in the northern foothills of the high-altitude Xue Ba Mountains of northern Taiwan. It’s a mountainous area with no highways or train routes that stretches southeast to Yilan and Hualien, and borders Hsinchu and Miaoli counties to the southwest. Rivers roll down through the area on their way to the ocean; they’re charged with the high mountain energy.

Mr. Yu has been growing tea organically for more than ten years, but the vast majority of tea farmers in the area do not. Great amounts of pesticides and chemical fertilizers are sprayed there, to the detriment of the ecosystem and the future of tea production in the region. He decided long ago to stop being a part of this problem and has since become a shining example of someone who can produce fine tea without polluting the environment. Mr. Yu has become renowned, with several magazine and newspaper articles covering the positive impact he’s having on the region.

One noteworthy factor about his growing methods is that he doesn’t use any organic fertilizer or irrigation. This is one of the characteristics of Living Tea, referred to as “*ziran nongfa* (自然農法)” in Chinese (literally, “natural agriculture method”). It’s based on a philosophy of letting the tea bushes struggle on their own, helping them as little as possible, and letting the weeds grow up around them. This encourages the trees to weave themselves into the local ecosystem without any foreign agents, and grow stronger as a result. I like to refer to such farming as “beyond just organic.” It is much closer to Living Tea—full of vibrancy and harmony.

Plum Rain is a bright, clean and fresh tea. Its fragrance and aroma are cleansing, opening the pores and senses and leaving us open and clear. It is watery, fluid and has a delicate, soft Yin energy that meets the subtle body in an upwards movement through the head. Perfect for a summer day spent reading about chaxi...



Plum Rain (梅雨)



Pinglin, Taiwan



Green Tea



Taiwanese



~300-500 Meters



Brewing Tips

冲泡技巧 完成好茶

Once we have a handle on the basics of preparing a nice cup of tea, it is always helpful to periodically remember that there is no right or wrong way to prepare tea. Most of the qualities we use to evaluate tea are within us. Left in a forest, ten grams of the most expensive tea, worth thousands of dollars, and ten grams of the cheapest tea both turn into ten grams of dirt—and the frogs, bugs, plants and birds do not discriminate which is which. This doesn't mean that the quality we experience isn't important, but rather it reminds us that the comparisons we make and the "superior" and "inferior" we experience are relative and personal, and often in us as much as they are in the tea.

Our brewing advice for this month is to let go of all brewing advice, surrendering the ideas of a correct and incorrect way of brewing tea, a "better" or "worse" teaware, method or even tea. This means simply remembering what tea really is: water, heat and leaves. You only need a bowl for this. Place a few leaves of this month's tea, Plum Rain, in a bowl and add hot water.

The heart we bring to the moment, to our tea, is by far the most influential factor in tea brewing. Clarity, calmness and open-hearted kindness are the best brewing advice we can offer. More than the water, tea, teaware or method, our state of heart-mind determines the tea we prepare and the tea we receive and experience.

When we smell the tea and enjoy its fragrance as it is, we let go of comparing it to other green teas we have had, or perhaps even other steepings of this specific tea. We get to know it as it is, without wishing it was otherwise. This acceptance fertilizes presence and helps us to realize our habit of dissatisfaction with whatever is happening in the moment—wishing this or that was added or taken away and not relating to things as they are. When we let go of brewing parameters and reset our ideas about "quality," in terms of teaware, tea or brewing method, and just return to leaves in a bowl, simple and without form, we then return to the beginner's mind and wash away our certainty. In this way, we open our minds and start afresh, looking at everything anew with splendid wonder and curiosity. The great tea master Sen no Rikyū (千利休, 1522–1591) said that the Way of Tea was practiced "one to ten and ten to one," meaning that there is nowhere to go. Advanced techniques are basic techniques mastered. Spirit and heart are the foundation of all techniques—the most basic of all. Returning to the beginning keeps us humble and free from ostentation—the ostentation of thinking we know what is best, that we are superior to others or have a unique, privileged perspective that allows us to see more clearly.

Through a radical simplification of tea down to its most basic elements of leaves, water and heat, we remove all the mindmade, human aspects of tea preparation (as much as possible) and let the spirit of tea shine more clearly. This can be incredibly insightful and help to re-inspire us to forget all the techniques and information about tea we have collected. Then we can meet with this very bowl, this very sip directly and perhaps more completely. There is an old Zen saying: "rather than seeking the truth, simply drop all opinions." This could be interpreted to mean that once the mind's filters, biases and opinions are set aside, the world is there in front of us. This is clear, direct and perhaps as true as an experience can be: just this bowl of tea as it is. In a way, this is both the beginning and the pinnacle of tea preparation and therefore, the most important "brewing tip" of all.



Leaves in a Bowl

Sidehandle

Water: spring water or best bottled

Fire: coals, infrared or gas

Heat: lower heat, shrimp-eye, 85–90 °C

Brewing Methods: leaves in a bowl or sidehandle

Steeping: this tea is very tolerant (allow the leaves to open early on)

Patience: open-ended

茶 As with some red teas, if you are using a sidehandle pot, especially a large one, it can help with fresh green teas to take the lid off between steepings so that the leaves do not steam.





The Art & Practice of Chaxi

茶人: Wu De (無的)

茶席
一期一會

Tea Is a Way of Life

茶是一種生活方式

Tea is a living art, generating a beauty that we can appreciate with all the senses. Of course, there is the clear and powerful relationship we have with the exquisite flavors, intoxicating aromas and the spirit of calmness that settles upon us with every sip. But let us not forget that we can also walk through the tea space each day and absorb the aesthetics and spirit of our tea. As we devote our attention to tea as a practice and a way of living, we can discover worlds beyond the liquor steaming in our cups. Over time, we become the beauty we create through the art of tea, and tea becomes more than just a “thing” we are interested in, a space in our home or even a practice; it becomes a part of what our heart says to the world and what the world says to our heart. Tea is something inside of us as much as it is a leaf, plant, culture or activity. And that is why Cha Dao cannot be taught or learned, only cultivated. Tea is grown from within, not collected or given. Tea is not something I “have” as a teacher, which you then come to “get.” I can share techniques, experience and inspiration, but tea spirit grows like the trees that both are and are not the foundation of this Way.

When we start our tea journey, we are enthralled by the liquor itself and focus on the nuances of different teas, moving through a journey of taste. We may also be drawn in by the vast library of history, the rich culture and knowledge of tea and teaware production spanning continents and centuries. Over time, we may want to improve our brewing skills to make better cups—the way they taste when a more experienced friend makes tea for us. Eventually, our tea world expands with our love and understanding, and we begin to learn more about teaware, other traditions and methods of brewing, collecting tea and refining our preparation down to the details of water, coals, teapot shapes and more.

At some point, most of us find that as our attention to detail grows and we move down the path from the gross to the subtle, we eventually pass through a mysterious needle-hole where all the small details of our tea practice open up, expand and connect with all areas of our life and the world we live it in. At that point, tea becomes as vast, endless, open and daunting as it was when we first started learning—through that needle, we return to the beginner’s mind and realize how much more there is to learn, explore and grow into. When we find all the areas of our lives, homes, aesthetics, health and practice connected to our tea, we begin to devote more attention to that which supplements our practice, including the ergonomics, ambience and decoration of the space within which our tea unfolds. All those connected realms that support our tea are, in a manner of speaking, the “tea stage (chaxi, 茶席).”

If you think about it, “stage” is the perfect metaphor for all that supports our tea, for in theater the “stage” is both the literal platform and the background on which the performance unfolds and more generally the art of performance itself. In other words, there is this theater on such and such a street—the very stage we decorate for this particular performance of Hamlet, for example—and there is also the “theater” meaning the life of a stage actor and all it entails. The latter is the type of theater someone is referring to when they say, “I work in the theater,” which does not mean a specific place, but rather the art of acting on stage. Similarly, “chaxi” is both general and specific. In the abstract, chaxi is all the areas of our life that support our tea practice, including our other practices, what we study, eat and do for a living—all that we are. These things impact any art. How an actor lives and eats, dresses and treats her family will affect how she shows up on stage. More specifically, chaxi is the work we

do to prepare the space we serve tea in. This includes cleaning and setting up for tea, decorating and choosing the tea and teaware for the occasion. It also includes music, incense and any other factor that goes into our tea preparation, including the conversation we have with our guests or the silence we choose to share together. Anything other than the technique and brewing of the tea is “chaxi” in the specific sense. In the general sense, chaxi is the whole of it all, the setting up, the tea drinking and all that goes into it—the whole of the art of tea.

The broader meaning of chaxi is, of course, present in the particular and vice versa. Let’s say we invite some friends over for tea and we want the experience to be nice for them, so we clean up our table and decorate it with a runner and perhaps some flowers. We are creating a specific setting, a “stage,” to perform our art (of tea). We think about what tea we would like to share and why our guests may love it. Perhaps we plan some delicious treats to serve after the tea is done. We think about what to wear, deciding on something comfortable and loose, plain and unassuming. We then decide that we will light some incense before they arrive, allowing the calming fragrance of aloeswood to invite them in, make them comfortable and let them calm down. On this particular day, with these guests and this special tea, we decide that we want to aim for a more meditative expression of tea, but we don’t want the occasion to be overtly formal, so we refrain from playing any music and allow some light, pleasant conversation to slowly sputter and fade into silence. This happens naturally since the tea, environment and our calm heart all lead there. The guests start to notice the flavors and aromas in the tea, perhaps commenting on how delicious it is. They see the teaware, the flowers and how lovely the whole atmosphere is and feel welcome.



Then they notice warmth in their bodies and the calmness spreading from their hearts. Naturally, they hold the bowl and slowly slip into silence. We sit for some time and enjoy peace within and together. Eventually, we serve some water and smile or bow. We make eye contact with our guests and have a heartfelt talk, perhaps bringing out those treats we made earlier... After the guests leave, we clean everything up and put it away, thinking fondly of our guests and the occasion...

And that is a specific “stage,” one particular chaxi. But that won’t work every time, which brings us to the general practice of chaxi. As we go through this preparation, execution and clean-up of many tea sessions in various settings—home alone, out and about and serving many types of guests in many places—this practice becomes our “theater” in the more abstract sense of the art we do—our tea. Some ses-

sions are casual and we laugh and chat with friends, socializing through the hospitality of tea; others are formal and upright, ceremonial and meditative. This is just like life, which has its casual and formal occasions—the need for loose affiliation and upright nobility if we are to navigate it skillfully. Chaxi teaches us this. As they say, all tea lessons are life lessons.

And so, when we discuss chaxi we are talking about the art of preparing for, supporting and then cleaning up tea. We are talking about all the areas of a life of tea aside from the tea preparation itself. Of course, the way we prepare tea is in our chaxi, just as our chaxi is present in the tea sessions as well. They aren’t really separate in the bigger sense, but it’s useful to have a “chaxi” class that helps us learn how to get ready for tea, clean and set up our space, decorate and select the tea, support the session itself and how to

tidy up afterwards. What’s more, all of that is as transformative as the tea we drink and the preparation skills we cultivate on the Way of Tea. The stage is all the elements that support the performance, from the lighting to the costume, the music to the ushers who seat the audience.

Like anything else in life, what we put into our tea is what we get out of it. If we drink tea as a beverage, we get a delicious drink. If we don’t care about the setting and just sit at the table and make some tea and then get up, our tea sessions will reflect that less thoughtful approach. Guests may not notice the lack of attention that went into the occasion, or even care, but we all know what it feels like to attend an event in which time, effort and consideration were invested. We feel special as a result. There is no substitute for the feeling we get when we are honored by our hosts in a heartfelt way.



Many of the best tea sessions we ever had have as much to do with who we were with, where we were and the ambience there as they do with the particular tea we drank, no matter how fine it was. The best tea sessions may happen somewhere special with a great tea, or perhaps with some special people we love. There are many things that make a tea session memorable. The art and practice of chaxi is learning how to do our best to make them all special—even the most casual tea we drink alone.

Sometimes people confuse chaxi for formality, assuming that the way to make every tea session special is to make all of them formal, but nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes the best teas are shared loose and free, without much method or ado. Perhaps they happen outdoors

in a well-chosen spot or they involve a spectacular tea. Even little details like a properly cleaned space, a delicious treat after tea, some kind words or a special flower are enough to set the occasion apart and make it feel special for our guests.

Over time, this art of chaxi starts to teach us aesthetics, and to make our homes and lives a living art that we walk through, breathe and then share with others as an expression of our Zen. As more tea flows, we start to become the art of tea. We realize that we *are* the living, breathing answer to the koan. Sitting for tea becomes a simple and very natural expression of who we are and how we relate to the world. We focus on learning how to choose the best water, how to choose the right tea for this session, how to decorate, arrange flowers and count-

less other details. Honing in, we then pass through the eye of the needle and come to the realization that how we do anything is how we do everything. In that way, tea becomes life and life becomes tea. The boundaries of our chaxi expand beyond the tea room and we realize that we are always preparing tea, from the moment we wake until the moment we sleep. At that point, tea isn't something we do, but something we are: Chajin.

The Spirit of Chaxi

Though the locations, ambience, tea and teaware will change every time we brew tea, there are three spirits that pervade all chaxi practice. These could be thought of as the types of general flavors that are in all tea, or as subtle



threads that weave through each and every tea cloth we weave to serve tea on. These three are the roots of preparing for, executing and cleaning up after tea sessions. They are the foundation of our chaxi practice. By “spirit,” we mean the feeling, essence or inspiration of our chaxi art, not something disembodied or “other”—the guiding aesthetic of our art, in other words. That said, these intentions don’t really have a form; they can look any way that tea can look, and can be expressed subtly or with potency in any given chaxi. They come out in all the colors of our tea art. Therefore, naming them is a bit of a challenge, but the exploration of the philosophy and ideals that contextualize, and in some ways govern our chaxi practice can be helpful, so let us provisionally distill these spirits as hospitality, reverence and celebration.

The most apparent and easiest spirit that informs all tea is that of hospitality. Around the world, tea is served when guests come over for a visit in order to show our hospitality. And this is the primary motivation for chaxi practice as well. When we make a chaxi, we honor our guests. Many people may not invest any more in their chaxi practice than this. In fact, we could say that in its simplest form the art and practice of chaxi is naught but a way of honoring our guests. Every arrangement is made to honor those who come over and to show them hospitality.

The world over, all people know what it is like to come to a space that has been filled with a spirit of hospitality. Respect for our guests is the main motivating spirit behind why we devote effort to creating chaxi. Whether or not we state this overtly, or even

focus on it intentionally, we all know that when guests come over we clean and decorate. As guests, we all know what it is like to arrive at a place that has been cleaned and decorated in our honor. It makes us feel special, respected and cared for, and makes the experience of any event—be it tea or a dinner—all the more special. Turning this into a practice elevates this spirit and makes it conscious. If we quickly stuff things in a closet just before our guests arrive to create the appearance of respect we aren’t really respecting our guests, we are instead respecting our own egos and reputations. We aren’t then expressing true concern for the guests, but rather for what they think about us. In other words, we want them to think we are the type of person that cleans and decorates to show hospitality even though we really aren’t.



There is some subtle truth of real respect missing from such a show of hospitality that is qualitatively different from a space that was honestly prepared for us. When a space is cleaned and decorated with a heartfelt spirit of hospitality and a genuine concern for the guests' experience, we can indeed feel this. After all, everything is built with the quality of the spirit put into it. What you put into something is what you get out of it. A fine product is made with fine parts and built with a spirit of love for that thing. The best cameras are made by photographers who love photography and design with that spirit in mind, and so on. And if a space is cleaned and decorated with heart, it will indeed affect the event that occurs in that space—that energy of concern and devotion will inform how guests feel. Taking the time to lovingly and consciously prepare for tea makes the tea drinking feel special. Random and casual tea feels random and casual. Sometimes that is okay, and just what is needed. But the art of chaxi adds a feeling of welcome, of a genuine gratitude for our guests.

It is a good idea to treat all our guests as special, as VIPs. Imagine how we would prepare a space if it was the last time we were going to see these guests and share tea (which it very well could be) and there is a much better chance the tea session will feel that way to those who participate. Over time, such devotion teaches us to treasure all the special tea gatherings we have, be they formal or casual, which helps us to cultivate a living gratitude for our time on this Earth and for the people we share it with. That love can spread and may just change the world.

Even when a session is simple, like a casual chat with two good buddies on a Tuesday afternoon, why not take the time to clean and decorate, laying out a chaxi that expresses casualness. We use our chaxi skills to create a sense of ease and peaceful heartspace, calm and comfort, taking as much time and devoting as much energy as we can to making sure that the guests at such a casual, easy-going gathering have a great time, including choosing the right tea, teaware, decorations, maybe some treats for afterwards and so on. I don't know about you, but in this hectic world, the chance to set down our worries and hang out with those

we care about in a free and relaxed way and enjoy ourselves and our time together seems to get rarer and rarer and more precious as well. Even casual time spent together can be honored. A grandmother can put her heart into showing hospitality to her grandson on his weekly visit and make the time spent together sipping tea and eating cookies all the more special and memorial as a result. She may even spend all week getting ready for her grandson's visit—shopping, baking and cleaning. It doesn't matter that the visit itself is casual, the love and concern that goes into it is alchemical nonetheless, changing the way the visit feels for him and for her—for her, all the "work" isn't work at all, it is a way of expressing her love. For him, it is a way of receiving. Her cookies and tea can heal things doctors cannot even see... The more we invest, the less we take such times for granted, and the less we take each other for granted as well. In the end, that will matter when our loved ones are gone. What's more, doing so will teach us gratitude itself, which will grow in our hearts and spread to all the other areas of our lives we take for granted. Of course, formal tea sessions where we are sitting for ceremony are equally important, and also require that we take the time to think about all the ways we can make our guests' experience better, including which way they face when they sit for tea so they have the best view, which tea to serve, how to clean and decorate, whether to use incense and music, what we would like to wear and why—all the things that go into hosting any formal event with hospitality and loving-kindness.

This practice of honoring our guests shouldn't be excluded from our solo tea sessions either. The same spirit of honoring a guest can be applied to ourselves. Why not show myself hospitality? Why not love myself and time spent alone as much as I love and serve my guests? Do I also not feel different when I enter a space that was lovingly prepared out of kindness and hospitality? It serves me well to honor and love myself. How I love myself *is* how I will prepare my tea. (Even when I do have guests, reverence for myself is still included, for I also sit for tea as the host.) When I take the time to create a clean, well-thought-out space and then sit and enjoy being alone, I can devote

the same attention and care as I would for a large gathering. And the process is really the same: what tea to serve, how long to sit for (perhaps measured in timeless bowls or cups), cleaning, decorating, choosing music that will make me happy and so on. Then I will stop taking time alone for granted and perhaps utilize the space better, connecting more deeply with my tea and tea brewing and encourage a spirit of mindfulness in my daily life.

Mindfulness could, in fact, be considered a fourth spirit of the art and practice of chaxi, but I think it is more easily placed within a discussion about reverence, for when we respect something we are naturally and gracefully mindful of it. We listen to our beloved because we love them. When we respect something, we devote our attention to it. In a disposable world, where we grow up surrounded by things used and tossed out daily, and even the so-called "long-term" products are built with planned obsolescence, we often lack respect and reverence for things, for Nature, for ourselves and for others. Through chaxi, I have learned reverence for ordinary things, for tea and for myself. And the more reverent I am, the more mindful I am. And this kind of mindfulness is perfect, because it is natural and relaxed; it isn't forced or held tightly. Samadhi, which is "one-pointed mind," is not the scrunching of the brows elicited by active, pressured concentration, but rather the clarity of an open and clear mind focused on one thing that is born out of respect and love for that thing. When we handle a precious antique that we deem to be very valuable, we do so mindfully—and no one needs to tell us to—we do this because we value it, we respect it. Its worldly value doesn't even matter; it could even be a fake, and really worthless junk, but so long as we respect it, we will be mindful. When you think about it, reverence and mindfulness are the same tree, rooted in the same insight. The whole of tea practice is contained in this respect, since it allows mindfulness to be cultivated in a soft, natural way born of the respect we feel for tea. And, for us, that respect extends to the space within which we prepare tea. And that is why reverence is such a foundational intention in the art and practice of chaxi.

It might be helpful to think of a chaxi as a mandala: a work of art representing higher thought and deeper meaning. A mandala connects a moment to the cosmos or the dharma. It is art that expresses a deep truth or a connection to great Nature, the context for our lives and our tea. This unfolds on many levels, like a fractal. Since we sit within our chaxi and drink tea, it is like a mandala we inhabit, touch, taste and smell, not just look at or think about. Of course, the connection our chaxi has to deep truth or to Nature could be expressed directly through the theme of our decorations, but there are many lines in the geometry of how a chaxi intersects our lives. As we discussed earlier, any given chaxi is an expression of our overall chaxi practice, the way that a single arrow is a present-moment manifestation of the archer's cumulative practice. As our experience with serving tea grows, so does our chaxi; as our heart deepens, so does our chaxi; and as we drink more tea, the spirit of tea also finds expression through our chaxi. We use a single chaxi to express our love for tea and tea drinking, allowing the single tea session to connect to all the sessions we have had and will have in our lives. If we so desire, we can follow this senti-

ment outwards in ripples to the cosmic and see that all tea sessions everywhere in space and time are also connected. The art of chaxi is also an expression of that great energy...

Sometimes we confuse reverence for solemnity. We think that we can only revere the serious and we associate the feeling of deep respect with somber occasions. There can be something serious about reverence, especially if we aren't used to it, but in truth we can laugh, play, explore and learn with reverence as well. Wonder, awe and open curiosity are all expressions of reverence. You have to respect something deeply to be awed by it, to devote time to exploring and learning about it. Children are often naturally reverent. In fact, in typical Zen fashion, there are numerous stories of Zen teachers and lunatics who practice reverent irreverence, making irreverence itself something that can be imbued with a spirit of respect and deep regard. Reverence can really be expressed in any shape or form; it is a spirit, an intention or guide that steeps into our chaxi practice. Reverence isn't a formula; it isn't tight or loose, formal or casual. Reverence doesn't look a certain way. It isn't a how-to recipe for making a chaxi; it is a spirit we imbue all

our chaxi with, no matter the occasion. Like love, true reverence has no object; it is a field, a Buddha-field.

If we take the time to cultivate reverence for our tea and for the practice, that will shift our experience when we sit in the space and drink tea, as well as the experience our guests have when they come over and sit for tea. Reverence need not be expressed formally, meaning that every session is serious or silent. We can express reverence even through friendly and cordial tea, daily tea by ourselves or with our family or any other type of tea we serve. Even if we lose ourselves in a friendly chat, laugh out loud and ding our teaware, we can still take the time to prepare for tea in a way that is both an expression of reverence and a path leading to it.

Chaxi is an expression of the heart and cosmos, and it also leads to deeper and more present experience because it comes out of that spirit. Rather than viewing the practice of chaxi as sacred versus mundane, it is helpful to see chaxi, and indeed all tea practice, as the forging together of the sacred and mundane. All too often, we seek to escape what we call "ordinary" and experience something "special." But in doing so we miss all the specialness within our ordinary lives.



There are a trillion ordinary miracles sparkling within the most ordinary living being. Nature is super enough without anything “supernatural.” These bodies are the result of billions of years of evolution and the matter within them was born of the stars long before that. That we are awake, aware and alive is powerful enough. Children understand this and look at the world with awe. They know that the best “more” isn’t the addition of more things, but rather the more we experience when we look closer, breathe and become present and notice that there is much more to see in the ordinary than we previously thought possible. To see the extraordinary as extraordinary is ordinary (anybody can do that; it is common), but to see the extraordinary in the ordinary is *truly* extraordinary (rare, in other words). The reverence of chaxi practice teaches us to revere the ordinary. What could be more ordinary than a simple bowl or cup of tea? If we can drink tea with reverence, and through it experience connection to deep truth, to Nature or to the cosmos, we can cultivate the same in all that we do.

Sometimes we think that to become “more” awake, or “spiritual,” we have to do more of a particular activity,

like ceremony, meditation or yoga. The truth is that the deeper “more” is not an addition, but a deepening. When we can apply the mind we cultivate in meditation to walking up the stairs, chopping potatoes or drinking tea, then our lives are “more” of an expression of our awakening. What’s more, this is the path from the mundane to the sacred. When we see the sacred in the ordinary, mundane life lived simply, our proximity to the source increases, until we realize that we are the Dao and our lives are its expression. This is the cyclical nature of chaxi practice, and what makes it a fractal, a mandala. We practice choosing tea and teaware, cleaning and decorating and then serving tea and cleaning up with reverence. Then, that inspires us to be more present, to look more closely at life and the mundane and see the macro in the micro, which in turn roots us more deeply in the soil of the cosmic. As our crowns grow, so do our roots and our leaves then become expressions of the depths of our roots, just as the roots take nutrients gathered by the leaves and use them to grow deeper and stronger. In other words, each chaxi is an expression of our reverence for life, but it is also a living artwork that we then sit down

in and use to deepen our experience of living reverence. And that is how chaxi turns our lives into art while simultaneously teaching us the art of living. Through the practice of chaxi, we can imbue our lives with a spirit of reverence, transforming them into a living expression of respect for life by loving our lives. When we beautify the ordinary, we show that love, and the more we give love, the more we receive. Our tea then expresses our Dao and leads us and others back into that Way...

We can think of the reverence we cultivate through tea as a general and open reverence that is like a field or feeling without any object. As such it is a way of being, a way of seeing the world. However, our reverence does have objects to focus on in the art and practice of chaxi. When we prepare a space with heart, we honor our guests and honor ourselves. We also honor tea, inviting this plant and the spirit of Nature into our homes and lives. Every chaxi should start with this intention in mind: to honor our guests, ourselves and Tea/Nature. As we participate in honoring ourselves, our guests and our tea each day, and the days turn into weeks, months and years, we learn how to honor. Maybe “learn” isn’t the right word, and “remember” is better.



We then connect to the more general, objectless reverence that is a way of walking, a state of mind. For me, the two most important skills needed for self-cultivation are listening (with more than the ears—receptivity, in other words) and the ability to honor. I think we all naturally know reverence. We are born of the sacred, and it is a natural and necessary part of a healthy life. Reverence is our birthright, though many of us have forgotten, grown out of practice—as individuals and as a society. Once you start honoring again, you realize how natural it is, how important and necessary. Over time, reverence becomes a way of life, and as naturally, graceful and effortlessly a part of daily life as cooking or doing the dishes (and within those activities as well).

As we grow, it is worth taking the time to cultivate a feeling of reverence for self, guest and tea, and then fill your chaxi with that spirit. The more details you think of when preparing for tea, and then fill those details with hospitality, loving-kindness and honor, the more impactful and meaningful your tea sessions will be. This doesn't have to be an ambiguous feeling, as there are plenty of practical details that we can attend to in order to improve our tea. Concern for those details is another way of saying "honor" or "reverence." I see reverence as deep, loving concern, and the ensuing mindfulness and attention to detail born of that concern.

Beyond our desire to honor our guests, ourselves and tea, there is another important, and often neglected, aspect of reverence in our tea practice: *honoring the occasion*. Beyond just our guests, every chaxi should honor the occasion itself. As we discussed earlier, it doesn't matter if it is a causal chat with buddies or a silent tea ceremony, every tea session is precious and unique. This teaches us to stop taking life and others for granted. We dress up for formal occasions not just to honor our hosts or guests, but also to honor the occasion itself. If I wear pajamas to someone's wedding, I am not just disrespecting them, I am disrespecting the occasion since my behavior suggests that this day is just like any other. Perhaps we have grown careless and forgotten how to revere an occasion and need to remember this. Maybe some practice will help us do so.

In tea, this respect for the occasion is often expressed through the saying "one encounter, one chance (*ichi go ichie*, 一期一會)." One encounter, one chance means that even if we meet at the same place every day and drink the "same" tea, the place, ourselves and the tea will never be the same again. This is our one and only chance to meet. Sometimes tea lovers mistake "this tea" and "that tea." They take a sip of a fine tea and say, "I want some of this tea!" What they mean is that they want a bag of this tea, a canister of its leaves. From a deeper perspective this is a mistake. First of all, we cannot "have" the tea any more than we already have it now. We are drinking it, after all—imbibing it into our bodies. How could we have more of it than that? It is literally becoming us and we it. Secondly, even if we buy a big bag of "this" tea and take it home and brew it a hundred times it will never, ever, ever be *this* again. This cup is unique—one of a kind. This place will never be the same, the tea will never be the same and we also will never be the same. After all, we also are not static. We are made of flow and change, so the next time you and I meet for tea, you won't be the same you and I won't be the same me.

Heaven makes no two tea leaves alike, so a bag of tea has subtle differences each time we scoop from it. Every time we sit for tea there are a million, billion sparkling unique things to notice—things that have never happened before and never will again. Thinking that we "know" this tea and have had it before dulls our senses and cuts us off from the wonder and beauty of the present moment. We forget to notice, to feel awe and gratitude, to be curious and open, ready to listen and receive, ready to learn and grow. The more moments of our lives we dismiss, the less we truly live. We then fall deeper into habit, and start living like automatons: We aren't awake, aren't appreciating life, living and being—and stuck on repeat... Our tea then passes by like any other ho-hum routine and we forget to appreciate it. We can do this with our friends and loved ones too—taking them for granted, assuming they will always be there and not stopping and truly looking at their living, breathing body as it shines before us in this very moment. Instead, we turn

them into two-dimensional stories, patterns based as much on our own filters as on their being. The art and practice of chaxi reverses this trend, reminding us to honor the occasion—to see each and every tea session as an opportunity to be present and to respect our time spent together. Respecting the occasion means respecting the opportunity we have to meet and share this unique encounter—so unique and precious that it has never happened before and in all of eternity will never happen again. Waking up means arising out of the cloudy, sleepy habits of the mind and living fully embodied in this present moment, together with the whole universe. One encounter... one chance... If we miss it, it is gone forever. *Ichigo ichie*.

Our minds have a greater impact on our tea than any water, teaware or method. The more reverence we apply to preparing for tea, the more ready we will be to sit down with a clear mind and open heart. The fact is that chaxi practice is a reminder; it helps us remember to remember. When we devote our hearts to creating a reverent space, paying attention to all the details, cleaning and decorating, we then sit in that space, and it is charged with that spirit. As a result, we remember to sit up, to enjoy our tea more and be more present, to not take ourselves, our guests, our tea or the occasion for granted. Of course it is difficult to sit up mindfully and with presence in a messy space filled with clutter. Of course it is difficult to remember to have gratitude and not take our tea, our life or time with our loved ones for granted when we make tea in a space that is conducive to mindless routine. The more effort we invest in preparing the space, clearing it of clutter (much of which is born of our habits and habit-minds), decorating it and ironing out all the little details that will honor ourselves, our tea, our guests and the occasion—the more we do all that, the easier it will be to sit up in that space. Maybe you don't need such reminders to respect and honor, to be present and not take life and others for granted. If you don't, bless you. But I do. I absolutely need such reminders, and the more I invest in chaxi, the better. The more I put into my tea practice, the more I get out of it, including greater enjoyment of the tea and the occasion.

茶 Vimalakīrti is a Buddhist lay-saint who left behind the sutra that bears his name. His hut has often been compared to the tea room because in one legend he used his powers to expand the interior of the hut to accommodate a huge crowd of 80,000 Buddhist monks, nuns, as well as gods and goddesses who all came to hear him discourse on the Dharma. The meaning is that the whole universe is within the hut, just as it is within a teapot, and eternity in the cup. The micro is not just a symbol of the macro, but it contains infinity and eternity within it. Vimalakīrti's "ten by ten" hut became the model for Buddhist hermitages and later tea rooms built by those seeking to temporarily leave the world of dust. When we make a chaxi, the space we do it in also contains room for 80,000 nobles and devas, for we invite the world to live through our tea, and then through our tea, we are able to glimpse the cosmos. Connection between the orbits of tea pouring, chaxi making, living and dying, ecosystems, planets and even galaxies demonstrates and expresses the boundlessness of our tea space. The art and practice of chaxi is an expression of this, and a celebration of the infinite dimension in tea.





To me, the art and practice of chaxi is like putting metaphorical sticky notes up all over my tea space, reminding me that I *do* respect tea, that I *do* love and honor myself, that I *am* grateful for my guests and for the time spent together... The more I practice this, the more I become it and live it without the need for reminders (slowly getting there). For this reason, chaxi has become as essential to my tea practice as tea, teaware or brewing method. The way a master craftsmen cares for his tools, cleans them and lays them out in an orderly way before work defines how he works. Similarly, a Chajin knows that chaxi is tea, and tea is chaxi.

When a space is prepared with reverence and respect, we remember not to take anything for granted. The problem with the above discussion of reverence is that it seems to suck the joy out of tea drinking. We have a mistaken assumption that formality is something that constricts, that holds us back—it is itchy, tight and uncom-

fortable—and it is as far from fun as you can get! But that is the wrong type of sitting up; the kind enforced from the outside. At first, remembering how to honor can seem unfamiliar. For me, and for many of you no doubt, our reverence muscles are weak, having grown up in a world that doesn't respect much. So, it can feel a bit stiff doing so, but once you experience the joy of remembering that you do love yourself, honor life, tea, Nature and others, it becomes easier and easier. You start to see ceremonial space as natural and desirable, not stiff, contrived, stifling or uncomfortable. Accordingly, the desire to sit up and be present, clear of mind and open-hearted grows and it becomes what you *want* to do, not what you have to. Respect grows from within, in other words. Then you begin to understand how hospitality and reverence lead to the third spirit of the art and practice of chaxi, celebration.

The more we pay attention, the more we experience. Ever re-read a

book for the fifth time and find new parts, wondering why you never noticed them before? Ever drink a familiar tea and notice nuances you never did before? Each moment is unique, remember. The more present we are, the more deeply we enjoy where we are, what we are doing and the people we are doing it with. It seems obvious that the more present we are the more we notice, and the more we notice the more we enjoy. Of course, the presence and uprightness we seek isn't tense or forced, feigned or imposed from the outside; it must be natural, free and complete without trying. In my experience, the more prepared and clear I am, the easier it is to reconnect with that state when I sit for tea.

When an event is well-organized, we are more likely to be able to enjoy it, engage with others and fully participate in it. When things are sloppy and not prepared with good intention, more can and does go wrong and we then realize we have to interrupt our



tea to get up and grab the utensil we forgot, for example. The more prepared we are, the easier it is to celebrate our tea, to enjoy it fully.

Cleaning, decorating and attending to all the details before and after a tea session help us more fully enjoy our tea. It makes the space where the tea is enjoyed more beautiful and adds to an ambiance of relaxation, beauty and ease. It helps us be more present, aware and calmly, loosely attentive so that we don't take our tea for granted, which means we experience and appreciate more in each sip, touching the tea's delicate messages, like the subtle fragrance, the mouthfeel or energy in our body, or perhaps even see through the tea to the clouds within the water, the mountain in the tea tree's roots or the sun in its leaves. The art and practice of chaxi also helps us to be prepared, which means we can relax once tea starts and enjoy ourselves, since every detail was thought of with concern. All we need is near at hand and ready,

and everything was designed to suit the contours of this particular session, be it a deep and quiet ceremony, a casual chat or even "kitchen tea" shared over a plate of toast. The beauty of tea is living and therefore meets every area of our life in its native space and demeanor.

If you think that it doesn't matter, that the ease and comfort of routine is better and you cannot be bothered, try an experiment: The next time you are drinking the most casual kitchen tea over a plate of toast, take a minute to step outside, pick a flower and bring it in. Put it in a glass or vase and set it next to the plate and then go ahead and drink your casual, morning tea with toast as you always do. I wonder if the tea and toast will taste better?

Don't forget to celebrate and make tea a celebration of living and of being alive (think on the difference between those two). Make the art and practice of chaxi itself a celebration. If the chaxi is created in celebration of tea, the tea

session will also be joyous and blissful. By "celebrate," I mean enjoy yourself fully: enjoy the tea, the occasion and your guests. Enjoy your life and let your tea remind you to enjoy yourself. Always put some of this spirit into your chaxi, even when you are arranging a setting for the most formal of tea ceremonies held to honor the most special of occasions, or in deep silence in the midst of a meditation retreat—even then, be sure to add a spirit of celebration and joy to the setting, so that whoever sits in it remembers how wondrous, special and wonderful it is to be alive and how delicious this tea is. Such a space quickly fills with cheer, warming the hearts of all those who come in. And that kind tea makes the world fantastic and suddenly everything feels beautiful again, as if we are all on the same team, working together—even the divergent ones... That kind of wholeness, heart space and connection is the kind of tea that makes the world a better place.

The Practice of Chaxi

茶席練習

The practice of chaxi starts and ends with tea. Sometimes we can get too lost in our desire to create the perfect event that we forget the guest of honor. It is as if I hired your favorite band, cooked your favorite meal and decorated the whole house for your birthday and then once all your friends and family arrived, we realized that we forgot to invite you to your own party! Cleaning, decorating and preparing for tea comes to nothing without tea. The stage is there to make the star shine. The audience shouldn't even notice the stagehands, lighting, backdrops, costumes or music; it should all support the performance so well that memories of the captivating show are all that the audience leaves with. In the same way, we aren't trying to clean or decorate in a way that draws attention to itself. Obviously, we don't want our guests to leave thinking "that space was clean and those flowers were pretty." We want them to leave having had a great *tea* experience, remembering the tea itself. This is true of any art. A restaurant's ambiance certainly enhances the experience and is vital to its success, but it is no substitute for good food—and the food is what the chef wants his patrons to remember.

For some of us, there is going to be a metaphoric "soft" and "hard" chaxi. The "hard" chaxi has to do with the decoration of the tea space itself, meaning perhaps the building of the room/house, its more permanent features and/or decorations. The so-called "soft" chaxi would then be all the arrangements we make within the space, day in and day out as we serve tea there and in other locations. The same principles apply when designing a tea room as a single chaxi. We always suggest that if you do have the luxury of having a devoted tea space, try keeping it as empty, simple and clean in terms of architecture, furniture and decoration as possible. The cleaner

and emptier the space is, the more different types of tea sessions it will accommodate. It will also then be more of a blank canvas on which to make our daily chaxi, allowing the unique "one encounter, one chance" aspect of the art and practice of chaxi to shine all the brighter. We never use "sticky" teaware or decorations, meaning anything that stays in the tea space and is used over and over again. By "sticky," we don't mean physically so, but rather anything fixed. Keeping things the same defeats the whole purpose of the practice of chaxi, and turns tea into a routine, one that quickly becomes mindless and lacking in presence. For this reason, the more permanent features of a tea room (or space within a room) should be approached much more carefully than any type of decoration chosen for a specific session. You should ask yourself if this architecture, furniture or decoration is really what you want to feature in every single tea session. Does it accommodate all the ways in which you will make tea? Does it distract? Will it conflict with certain types of chaxi? Is it decidedly rough or elegant, meaning that it will distract from chaxi that point in the opposite direction? If you aren't sure, better not add that feature for now. The blanker the space, the better. Decorate it before each sit as opposed to doing it one time and then leaving it neglected/stuck for a long time. After all, we don't know what we don't know. Our aesthetics will certainly refine and grow as we advance in our tea practice. Why not leave blank space that we can fill easily and conveniently each day so that as our taste and understanding changes, and our wisdom deepens, we will always have a blank space to express our current understanding, whatever it is.

From one perspective, we start and end the art and practice of chaxi with tea. After all, chaxi begins with selecting a tea and ends with serving that

tea. In truth, we recommend starting and ending with a bit of empty space, as that open, formlessness might be considered an even deeper source and foundation for all tea practice. After all, the form is the formless manifest. For that reason, we often sit and quiet the mind before starting our chaxi. Sometimes this is just for a minute, or even a few breaths, but it is always worthwhile to make sure we are not rushed (Chajin are early) and that we feel calm, so that the creation of our stage is also infused with the right energy for the occasion. We also clean up the tea space before tea, which can be an opportunity to pacify the mind and slow down. Maybe we can focus on our breath or our hands as they work and just relax into cleaning, recognizing that we are making space for tea, opening our minds and hearts and purifying the space to honor our guests. The old Zen masters said that Cha Dao is 80% cleaning—cleaning inside and outside, purifying our heart so that we will make better tea and be open to receive tea and its wisdom of interbeing into us, while also cleaning the space we all will sit in. When you revere something, you want to purify it, refine and adore it. It is easy to clean when we respect tea, ourselves, our guests and the occasion. Cleaning isn't a chore; it is an honor. We are stretching the canvas and allowing the emptiness to shine. Sometimes we sit in the clean space for a moment after we are done cleaning up, content and loving the empty space, unadorned before we decorate it. After a pause, a breath and the resulting calm, the first order of business is to choose the tea. Without the guest of honor how can we decorate?

Choosing the tea for a session is certainly a fundamental aspect of the art and practice of chaxi, but it is one that is difficult to teach since it requires experience and also no small measure



of intuition. An affinity for tea and lots of experience serving tea aren't things I can teach or you can learn. The best way to develop an affinity for tea is to practice reverence, since respect means you will listen, and the more deeply you are listening, the more you will understand and the deeper your relationship to tea will grow. Tea's messages are soft, delicate and subtle, and they aren't spoken in a language we are used to (at least most of us). We have to listen deeply to hear them, and to see that the interbeing Tea is pointing out is within our own heart-mind as well.

Choosing a tea isn't all intuition though; there are some practical aspects too. We think about tea in terms of the seasons, as well as the weather on that particular day. Certain teas suit certain seasons of the year, which can be learned. There are exceptions, but for the most part we follow a seasonal calendar of tea drinking. Beyond that, we may also want to take a moment

and decide if we hope the session is going to be silent or chatty. For us, we would rather reserve our best teas for silent sessions. Why? So that all our attention can be devoted to appreciating and enjoying the tea fully. If we are going to get lost in conversation and not pay attention to the tea, we'd rather not brew a rare, special tea that may not have many sessions left. It takes calm, centered concentration to brew such teas to their fullest potential, and a quiet heart-mind to enjoy all the subtle nuances of flavor, aroma, mouthfeel and energy. In other words, fine teas deserve to be honored. There are exceptions to this, as with everything, but for the most part knowing the type of energy/ambience we are aiming for can help us choose a tea. We usually divide this into three general types of session: silent/ceremonial, calm/light/relaxed conversation and party/social. In the latter, the tea is obviously not the focus of the occasion, so we can choose accordingly. Setting the right

intention is important, but we must also be prepared to adapt, allowing the session to unfold in the way it wants to naturally, without forcing it along one of these paths. Sometimes we set up for a chat and end up deep in reverie and vice versa—the most formal space can erupt in laughter and turn into a party.

We also try to avoid serving guests teas we are unfamiliar with. This means that we don't use tea with guests as practice sessions. It is better to get to know a tea on our own and develop our confidence and affinity with it, as well as an ability to prepare it the way we want to before we serve it to others. This is akin to the way we make our "famous curry" when guests come over for dinner, rather than opening the refrigerator and making something random. Of course, there are exceptions. Some gatherings might even be organized specifically for the purpose of trying some new teas together with tea friends. (What type of chaxi could we make to celebrate such a gathering?)

A very close second to choosing the tea is choosing the brewing method. We practice five different brewing methods: gongfu tea, whisked tea and three different bowl teas (leaves in a bowl, sidehandle and boiled tea). That is a lot of choices! Sometimes the event dictates which brewing method we have to use, so this factor could even come before choosing the tea, but that is unusual. Certain teas are better when brewed in different ways. Above a certain quality level we always choose gongfu. Just like silence, gongfu brewing is how we can bring out the best in a tea and really appreciate all its nuances. Gongfu tea is also for intimate groups, which makes it ideal for fine teas since we can then use less tea and preserve it. We tend to keep gongfu sessions at around five to six people, or less. For ceremonial sessions or sessions with larger groups of people we will choose bowl tea. Choosing the brewing method is important because without it we cannot even begin to arrange our chaxi, since we won't know which type of teaware to choose. We never blend gongfu and bowl tea aesthetics, techniques or wares, so this is an important preliminary step. There are also lots of functional details related to these different brewing techniques, as they require different amounts of room for movements, wares and placement, etc.

Once we have selected a tea, a general ambiance we are trying to create and a brewing method it is then time to choose a theme for a chaxi. Having a theme will always result in more skillful arrangements. Sometimes the theme is obvious (like your birthday tea) and other times it is up to us to create one. The theme of our mandala should be open, loose and unfinished, suggesting more and beyond itself. This aesthetic is called “*yugen*” in Japanese. In Chinese it is “*you xuan* (幽玄),” which literally means “graceful dark.” This refers to the feeling of a path that leads on, the moon partially covered by clouds or a boat disappearing over the horizon. Nothing is ever complete or permanent; everything becomes something else. And if we look carefully, everything suggests connection. The circles of interbeing start with the obvious links, but are carried away by greater and greater concentricity, reaching planetary and then

galactic orbits. *Yugen* refers to things that are mysterious and profound, the feeling of losing ourselves in something because we feel like the beauty is only partially perceived with more to explore and experience just beyond what we can see. The theme of a chaxi should also be open-ended like this.

We never tell our guests our theme. They may see something totally different than us, especially if the theme is not obvious. The theme is just a very helpful tool for us to create a special arrangement. If we need to discuss the chaxi, then it hasn't done its job. The performers shouldn't need to come out on stage and discuss the lighting or backdrops with the audience. That only happens if something has gone wrong. I was lucky in that I had a unique opportunity for some time at the Tea Sage Hut, when I taught the chaxi class during ten-day courses, since the chaxi class often occurred the day after the only truly formal tea session of the course. On the previous day, we would take extra time to create a beautiful chaxi so that the guests would have an amazing whisked tea ceremony. The following day during class, I would sometimes use the previous day's sessions as part of our discussion, which offered me the unique opportunity to discuss with my guests what they thought the chaxi “meant.” I always knew when the previous day's chaxi had been successful, because on those fruitful days the guests' answers were always far more profound than my intentions had been. In other words, they were able to naturally read into the “meaning” of the chaxi much more deeply than the theme I had chosen when creating it. And we never told them to even stop and think about what any of it “meant” before the tea. In fact, they were given very little instructions other than “enjoy the tea.” The best chaxi themes are ones that open up and allow the guest to look through them, to see into the mandala and penetrate the dharma or cosmos it is connecting to. As a result of that experience, I started suggesting that students of chaxi have such conversations with other students after the fact. After all, as Chajin many of our friends are also Chajin. If your tea friend comes over for tea, and the two of you are close, you may ask them the next time you see them a few days later what

they thought of your chaxi and what it “meant.” I keep putting “meant” in quotes because I don't want you to think that the theme of a chaxi is a story or a concept. It is often a feeling, sentiment or deep truth that cannot be verbalized. And even if it is specific, it should be *yugen*, suggesting deeper and more mysterious things beyond itself.

Zen art and poetry is all *yugen*. The canvas is mostly empty and a few brushstrokes can turn that empty space into a lake that the mind fills in, wondering what is beyond the lake. For that reason, it is important to not let our theme be too pronounced. Be careful adding things. The best way to decorate a chaxi is the way Chajin live: *space first*. Value empty space above filling it. Tea people enjoy doing nothing, just sitting around drinking tea. Space is not just something waiting to be filled; it has its own value. Like all tea lessons, this is a life lesson: If we left more room, more unadorned space, our homes would be calmer, brighter and less cluttered. And if we left more space in our schedule we would be more free, less stressed and more open and curious. Space has a value, and valuing space is what we mean by “space-first” living. Value space in a chaxi more than decorations. We try to use only necessary teaware. Some types of wares are borderline, offering a convenience but are not necessary. We use those kinds of wares occasionally, but try to avoid being dependent on them. Unnecessary tools are just clutter. The same is true of decorations. There are no neutral elements—everything is either helping or hindering the subject: tea. Most of the corrections I make to students *in chaxi classes* (I would never judge, let alone correct, a chaxi of a session I was a guest at) are taking things away. In practice, students often add too many things and when you ask them to take something out, they themselves will declare that the chaxi is much better and feels more welcoming. Also, clutter can get in the way of free and open movements during the service, which really defeats the purpose of a chaxi (which is to be supportive of the tea service, not get in its way). In other words, stagehands shouldn't be on stage bumping into the actors, lights shouldn't flash in a way that calls attention and the props shouldn't block the action.

The easiest theme for beginners to start working with is Nature. As opposed to some deep truth or dharma, it is much easier to connect any given tea session to Nature. This can be a beautiful and very open (*yugen*) theme that is always poignant. After all, tea helps us to remember our connection to Nature. It also contextualizes our experience, which is beautiful and transformative. *Yugen* is not a suggestion of another world or something supernatural, but of the endless depths of mystery and profundity within *this* world, and that is why it is an aesthetic principle that lends itself to tea. It is always and ever helpful to remember that not just our personal lives, but the entirety of human experience from its antediluvian beginnings to its end all takes place within a natural world. Sometimes we get so lost in our human, mind-made drama that we forget that the environment is even here. The natural world is the stage of stages, on which every human experience unfolds. It is also a myriad of characters in our play as well, from the mountains, waters and

craggs to the plants and animals that flow in and out of our human stories. The best films and novels include detailed images or descriptions of the surroundings in which the action takes place, as the environment hosts all that happens within it and also participates in the action in all kinds of ways. And this sentiment, like the mandala, is a fractal, for our world is but one planet of many, orbiting a sun that is one star of many...

Bringing Nature into a chaxi can be as simple as the seasons, like suggesting autumn with some fallen leaves or spring with wildflowers. Yes, such themes are more obvious and less *yugen*, but they are beautiful nonetheless and are therefore a great place to start. Using the weather, the season and what is outside around our tea session—bringing the outdoors in, in other words—is a great place to begin a chaxi practice. It helps us choose a color scheme, decorations and more. Of course, we can also make Nature the theme of a chaxi by hosting the tea session outdoors. If we are hosting

outside, we try to only bring the bare essentials and to not decorate the space where we serve tea at all, or at least very, very minimally, since the Nature all around is itself the chaxi. For outdoor tea, arranging a chaxi is less about cleaning and decorating and more about choosing the right place to sit to accommodate the number of people, a flat ground for serving on and making sure the guests have the best view.

Once we have meditated for a minute, cleaned, chosen a tea, a brewing method and a theme, we can then start arranging the space for tea. We always, always start with the essentials. It is very helpful to prioritize choosing the right wares and all the accoutrements that are necessary. Devoting the proper time and respect (natural mindfulness) to this will ensure that we don't forget something necessary, which could interrupt our session and force us to get up during tea. After we have everything we need, we can then start to decorate. Seeing all the essentials also helps to figure out how to proceed with the decorations.



We usually start with something to brew tea on. This could be a stone, a piece of wood, a large leaf or often a tea runner (*chabu*, 茶布). This needn't be a cloth designed for tea; it could just be any old cloth. Using cloth is a good option because it offers us an infinite array of color and pattern choices depending on our theme. Once we have a base, we then arrange the essentials and sit and make sure everything is where it should be and there is room for the session to unfold properly.

At this point, we start decorating. This could be anything from flowers to plants or even a buddha statue. It could also be none of these things. Remember, space-first: *less is more*. In flower arranging, the art of arranging flowers for tea (*chabana*) is a different subset of flower arranging (*ikebana*). In normal flower arranging, the flowers are the subject (and rightly so), but in tea, *tea* is always the subject. Flowers shouldn't be the first thing our guests notice and they shouldn't distract from appreciating the tea. Arranging flowers for tea is often about choosing subtler arrangements that look a bit more wild and natural. This serves as a good example of tea- and space-first chaxi practice. No element should distract from the tea. We may want to choose what we wear with regards to this. Our clothes shouldn't stand out. They should be loose, comfortable and simple, perhaps blending in with our arrangement if possible. Of course, some sessions are casual and the decorations may not extend to what we are wearing. How much is invested into any given chaxi is relative to the session, and a matter of what best serves that occasion and tea.

After the main space is decorated, we then often think about peripheral aspects of the chaxi, like incense and music. Sometimes people come to one of our sessions and see that we used incense or music and then think that is a part of tea or of chaxi; *it isn't!* In fact, we would suggest *not* using music or incense most of the time (and if you aren't sure, then leave them out—less is more in space-first design). Space is the priority, as is tea. Whatever supports the tea is good. If we use incense, it is only aloeswood, which doesn't linger or impinge on people's ability to appreciate the aroma of tea. When we do use it, it is most often at the beginning,

as people are coming in—to purify the space and help people calm down. *Yugen* is subtlety. Tea is soft and leaves a gentle impression. That is why we have to be calm to prepare tea well, and quiet to really appreciate all the nuances within a cup of tea. Tea is like the quiet, delicate parts of a symphony—you have to be calm and open, really listening, to hear them. Decorations and peripheral elements are like spices: they can make or ruin the dish. They aren't the foundation of the art and practice of chaxi, tea is. Once the tea is solid, we can add some subtle, soft and gentle spice here and there, like some flowers, incense or perhaps music. However, any of these could easily distract attention away from tea. It is easy to see how the wrong music, or even the wrong volume, could leave our guests with an impression of the music instead of the tea. If the music was too loud to hear the dialog on stage, or was out of tune with the emotion of the plot, it could harm the performance. Like any other aspect of the stage, it should support the performance without drawing attention to itself. And that is what the art and practice of chaxi boils down to as well: *support the tea without drawing attention to any element*. The best tea production happens that way as well: Each step from the harvest to the withering, rolling to roasting all improve the tea but leave no trace. If you can taste the rolling, it wasn't done with mastery or love. In fact, all tea and chaxi are just an extension of the care and love that went into tending the tea trees, harvesting and processing the leaves. The same concern for detail, love and passion that the farmer lived, we bring home and make a part of each and every session. That means the cloth should support a harmony with the whole tea session and not stand out, and neither should the decorations, flowers, incense, music, clothes, etc. All these elements are here to support and improve our appreciation of tea.

As mentioned earlier, the session itself could also be considered part of a chaxi. It is common to be invited to a “chaxi” here in Taiwan, as opposed to being invited to tea. What happens in the session is perhaps better left to discussions of method, though. We also consider what happens after the session to be a part of the art and prac-

tice of chaxi. No matter how beautiful it is, the flower eventually falls. Mandalas are often created with colored sand, which is then swept up and put in a river, washing away hours of work. This means that we always leave time to clean up after tea. As a result, our teaware is always well-cared for. It is as nice to clean up after tea as it is before. Doing so isn't a chore, it's an honor. In fact, we often take this time to feel grateful for the opportunity to have served, and to think fondly of our guests. We sometimes even sit in the space for a few minutes and bask in the warm heartspace before cleaning up, wishing each of our guests well and hoping they travel safe and fare well. With a grateful heart, we clean up.

Sometimes we create what we call a “secondary chaxi,” which means that instead of cleaning everything up and leaving the tea space empty, we put most things away and change the arrangement slightly to sit as a placeholder until the next time we prepare tea. This may even serve as a reminder that it is time to sit for tea as we pass the tea space in our house the next day. An example of this could be taking away the flowers and teaware and putting a Buddha statue front and center with just one of the blossoms from the flower arrangement next to him, so that what was once a tea cloth with flowers and lots of teaware is now just a cloth with a Buddha (see p. 22). Moving the flowers to the center would perhaps be another example of a secondary chaxi. This placeholder keeps the space beautiful and can serve as an invitation/reminder as we pass by the next day, calling us back to tea. Other times, we admire the emptiness as it can symbolize death and rebirth—each day a new tea, a new us, a new encounter and chance...

The coming and going of chaxi is like the coming and going of the cups or bowls within a tea session; it is the breath of our practice. Clean, empty space blossoms into glorious color, flavor and aroma and tea fills the air. Afterwards, this beauty is washed away, becoming emptiness again. Over time, as our art and practice of chaxi deepens, the two merge and form becomes emptiness and emptiness form...







A Story of Three Chaxi

茶人: Andjelka Jankovic

I wouldn't consider myself particularly exceptional at creating a chaxi; I just really like the process. I rarely come back from a walk in my neighborhood without a little fern I picked, a bud of yellow flowers or a fallen autumn leaf that I can admire next to my tea.

Ever since the beginning of my life with tea, the process of arranging a chaxi has been very intuitive to me. Chaxi is not about randomly adding things and hoping for the best—and yet, it can also be just that. It's a silent conversation with the moment, the season, the day and the occasion. Chaxi involves the mood you'd like to welcome your guests into, as well as a sense of honor for this space and time that we are lucky to share together.

I often don't know what my chaxi will look like until moments before it comes together. I once ran out of my house just before a tea ceremony wielding garden secateurs so I could snip a beautiful branch of white bougainvillea hanging over a fence that came to mind as I was laying down the tea runner (*chabu*). I don't usually like to be breathless when my guests arrive,

but those gorgeous blossoms were worth it. Other times, I trust that the right elements will present themselves when I least expect it, like a friend bringing over a cutting of natives from her garden, or a branch I found on a hike months before (now dried) suddenly coming to life with a new purpose.

Chaxi is a practice that deepens your relationship with the *now*. The process is indeed a mindful pursuit in focus and attentiveness; to embody a sense of awe and joy before you even sit down for tea. I always trust that the chaxi will express the “one encounter, one chance (*ichi go ichie*)” of the moment perfectly, and I am just there to lend a helping hand. It is also helpful to remind yourself when you get too “heady” about a chaxi, of Master Tsai Yizhe's words in the December 2019 issue that, “Nothing in this life is permanent, so a single *chaxi* needn't be an earth-shaking affair!” The creation of chaxi continually brings wonder and creative flow to my own life, so I would like to share with you the story behind three of my chaxi in the hopes that they may help you in yours.

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一生茶的慶典



Chaxi One: Seaside Breeze with Baba

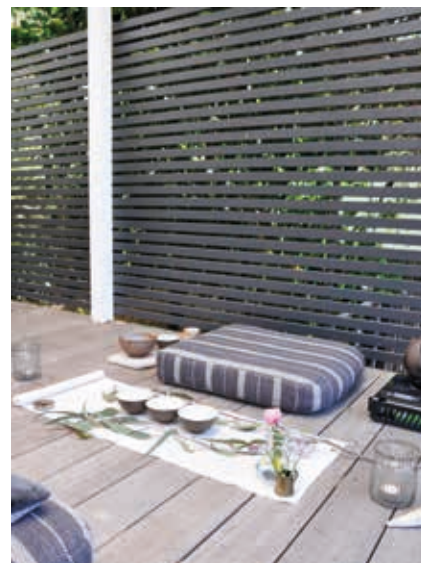
奶奶的海邊微風

My mum and I went away for our first weekend together in a long time to a small seaside town called Augusta in Western Australia. It is essentially the bottom of the world; the next stop is literally Antarctica. We were staying in a gorgeous restored vintage shack that used to belong to a shipwright. On this day, we were honoring the spirit of my dear Baba (my mama's mum) who passed away fifteen years prior. I knew I wanted to commemorate her with an outdoor tea ceremony. Baba often visits me in my daily tea sits, and I wanted my mum to feel her presence too. I set out three bowls for the three souls in attendance. Tea is the forever con-

necter, and of course Baba was with us, sitting with my mum and I for hours upon hours as we spoke about her and my mum's childhood memories.

The chaxi itself was very spontaneous. I found a Silver Princess Gum branch on a walk where the ocean becomes a river. My Baba's house in Rudovci in Serbia was surrounded by rose bushes, so there was a single rose on the chaxi to represent her. Also, there was a small sprig of Golden Wattle that we picked on the way back from collecting hot chips for dinner (an Australian delicacy). My Baba had mentioned a similar flowering tree in Serbia that was her favorite growing up.

Looking back on this chaxi, I admit I went a little "OTT" (over the top) by adding the candles and shells. I was a bit too on the nose with the theme, perhaps. I am slowly learning the merits of empty space and to practice simplicity in all my chaxi, even though I clearly could not help myself this time. A chaxi celebrates a reverence for everyday beauty. There is so much beauty in this pocket of the world. If any of us looks more carefully and takes the time to notice, we find such beauty all around us. We snuggled up in blankets, sipping tea outside in the breeze, knowing that those we truly love never really leave us.





Chaxi Two: On Leaving

關於離開

Tea brings the splendor of Nature to us indoors. It had been a long, hot summer and I was waiting in anticipation for the leaves to turn. I had just met a new tea friend named Laura who had recently moved back from Canada after living there for nine years. Canada is in many ways my soul's home—particularly the Canadian Rockies. I created this chaxi to honor our mutual love of autumn. I tried to be sparse but it's just not me. I love abundance! I scattered the leaves as if they had just fallen from a tree, trying not to let my perfectionist tendencies kick in to re-arrange them. They were perfect just so (albeit plentiful). I added one of the beeswax candles I rolled for the chaxi, placing it in a tree stump to represent the woods in Canada. It was a very cozy affair and it felt like we were in a cabin.

This chaxi ended up being a meditation on home. As Yanagi Sōetsu writes in *The Unknown Craftsman*: “Why do

we long for beauty? The Buddhists would reply that the world of beauty is our home and that we are born with a love for home. To long for beauty, therefore, is the same as to long for home.” I call this chaxi “On Leaving” (pun intended) because, but that was the strong theme that spontaneously came through while we were sitting in silence. We were drinking an old-growth Dian Hong called Groundless, which was not consciously chosen due to its name, but even that fit perfectly. This was a tea session that didn't want to end—bowl after bowl, we contemplated our own longings and recognized in each other the possibility of belonging to two places at the same time. I remember thinking: “Why must we leave the places we love?” and something answered: “To let go.”

I pulled out my copy of *A Year With Rilke* and opened to this message, which felt sent to us:

*Go forth to what? To uncertainty,
to a country with no connection to us
and indifferent to the dramas of our life.*

*What drives you to go forth?
Impatience, instinct,
a dark need, the incapacity
to understand.*

*To bow to all of this.
To let go —
even if you have to die alone.
Is this the start of a new life?*

This chaxi felt very cathartic, but for different reasons than I imagined it would when I created it. I thought it would be quite emotional to be reminded of a place we both love, and one so far away, but it was uplifting to sit with tea (another kind of leaf) and let our longings just be, letting go and being where we were.

Chaxi Three: All My Friends

我所有朋友們

I was inspired by Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, where he prepares a meal that he has hunted and grown by himself, and I wanted to make a chaxi where I gathered everything locally on my own. It was ambitious, and I didn't know how this would turn out, but it all started with a piece of silk...

I came across a stunning piece of earthy pink silk cloth at a local fair-trade shop. I was then told it was hand-dyed using eucalyptus leaves which blew me away as they are a sage green color (look it up!). It was then obvious to me that my extra special chaxi would be a homage to Walyalup (Fremantle), where I live now, by the ocean in Western Australia.

With my basket, I then went for a walk in a sacred local site called Booyeembara Park, which means "of the limestone hills" in the Aboriginal Nyoongar language. It was an important part of the Whadjuk dreaming story long before colonial settlement. I followed whichever path took my fancy. I came across a large flowering shrub of *Grevillea*—the only colorful flora in the park at this time of year in Djeran season—and so I asked quietly first and then picked a few stems. I later found out that Djeran is a time of red flowers and *Grevillea* (the small red spindly flower in the bottom left corner of my chaxi) were a traditional favorite among Indigenous Australian peoples for their sweet nectar, often called the original "bush lollies." As I was leaving the park, as serendipity would have it, on the side of the road near my car was a random deserted plank of wood. Amazingly, it was the perfect length for my chaxi! I cleaned it up when I got home, unsure how it

was to be incorporated, though I knew it had a role to play. It is satisfying to give such things a new life.

The morning of this "Sacred Sunday" ceremony, I was dropping off something to my friend Ella and in her garden was a native gumnut bush that looks spray-painted white but it's not. I have a particular love of gumnuts, so I gratefully took a small branch with me... Again, not sure exactly what for.

Making the chaxi, I reminded myself to be in the moment and to let whatever wants to happen arise. The tea stage was set with the eucalyptus-dyed silk *chabu*, then the plank fit perfectly underneath to provide an elegant shelf. Next, the *Grevillea* blossoms fit snugly in a tiny vase from Raneta Coolakova. I then placed the white gumnuts stem down (after another branch I gathered from Booyeembara Park did not go well). To add to the "Fremantle-ness" of it all, the small incense holder and the waste-water bowl (*kensui*) were both made by my friend Naomi Kido, a local Japanese potter. I also wore linen garments handmade by my talented friend Trish Bygott, who is a wonderful textile artist and designer. I then added a beeswax candle pillar to finish off the chaxi and learned a valuable lesson about excess when my guests sat down. The candle was an obstacle to navigate around in the ceremony and, while beautiful, it failed functionally, getting in the way of the tea service. I had to move it as soon as I realized this. As I mentioned, I am not known for restraint with my chaxi, but now I get it! Lessons steep in over time.

I call this chaxi "All My Friends" as an ode to the provenance of Fremantle and both the visible and invisible community that supports my tea practice.

I wrote in my journal afterwards: "I feel like I became the chaxi today." The energy of this ceremony is very hard to translate into words. It had its own intangible spirit. In the decadent silence, with streaks of sunlight on my face, and Hammock's *Silencia* hitting the perfect notes, my friends felt the same and the collective energy of the group brought so much wisdom and depth to the experience. As a line goes in one of my favorite books, "Beauty will dance with anyone who is brave enough to ask her."

Serving Tea

I have never made the same chaxi twice, and I never will. I have a lifetime of chaxi making ahead and I adore the process each time, ever more. As Wu De says, "The best questions come from within the practice." I have been asking myself: "Tea has given me so much, what would Tea like back?" Perhaps the experience of noticing Nature and adorning your chaxi for Her in this moment is enough. One of the many gifts of Tea is finding your way back to the beauty of the simplest everyday things. Whatever you give to your chaxi, it will give back to you through the space it holds for the tea ceremony—and give it tenfold. And then, as you are packing everything away, you smile at the *is-ness* of it all. Nothing is forever. Life is precious.







Every Chaxi is Perfect

🌱🌱: Frederik Wallin

Come sit down, friend. The wind is already souging through the pines. What you see in front of you is what we call a “chaxi,” or “tea stage.” It is akin to the stage of a theater troupe decorated with fake trees to help create the ambiance of the play they are performing. Likewise, black metal bands have upside-down crosses and perhaps fire and blood to show their obscenity and add to the mystery and terror they might be trying to portray in their concerts (I’m Swedish). In Tea, we do the same. But we do not build our chaxi with blood and occult symbols, fake trees or other props that belong on a theater stage. In Tea, there is but one goalless goal: to display Tea herself. And while we might love to listen to black metal, its themes and tropes are not suitable for the tea stage. Tea brings us closer to Nature, stillness, and harmony with all things. And the stage should be suited for this purpose. I have heard Wu De say several times that “there is only one star in the tea ceremony and her name is Tea.” We need to be like the stagehands pulling the strings backstage; we need to be prop makers and the sound

technicians making sure the sound and display are the best they could ever be. We do not strive to be visible, but to make the whole tea ceremony work smoothly. The musicians cannot play without instruments, and Tea can’t pour water over Herself. We are necessary, but we must know that we are not the star of the show. We are merely the vessel.

So what is a chaxi? The most typical chaxi is a floor or a table, often with a runner on it and maybe a vase of flowers, a small statuette of a Buddha or perhaps a small dish with tea leaves or a teapot you intend to use for the ceremony. There are no neutral elements in a chaxi, so make sure you are confident that *every single thing* in the chaxi is supposed to be there. If there’s doubt about a specific item, you are probably better off removing it. Remember that your most valuable decoration in a chaxi is space! Now, take another sip and listen closely, for the following is a contradiction indeed. In Tea, we learn further down the road that chaxi is *not* a tea stage. What?! But I just told you that it was. Well, as with many things, it is both and neither. Like the all-

mighty heart sutra says: “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” Chaxi will, the further you go, expand and surround all that is Tea and Zen and eventually life itself. We might start with a tea runner (*chabu*) and a vase of flowers or a small statue of Guanyin for our chaxi, only to realize that the table, the clothes we wear, the plants in our home, our arrangement of furniture, our front door, garden, apartment, driveway and neighborhood are all part of our chaxi. We could take our chaxi to infinite measures and make small signs from the parking lot or train station your guests are arriving at all the way to the front door, hinting that the way leads to tea. Of course, that is a lot of effort, and we might not have time to pour it into a tea session since there might be more critical elements to take care of, like lighting coals and cleaning your tea space. Nonetheless, it is vital to understand that chaxi is infinite and so contains everything. The chaxi exists in the universe, so the universe exists in your chaxi. There is no part of our lives that isn’t a part of our chaxi, just as the tea session never really begins or ends with tea.





Do you like the tea? Have another bowl! And let me tell you what I usually do when preparing for tea (usually with a great deal of help from my girlfriend). First, I clean the apartment. I dust things off, wipe things clean and vacuum so that my guests will feel welcome. It has been said before in this magazine but is worth repeating: imagine a serene place, calm, with room for contemplation and perhaps tea. Imagine it right now! You most likely imagined a beach, a forest or maybe a Zendo. Note that, most likely, these places are clean. You did not envision a cluttered desk or an apartment with clothes everywhere. A clean space fosters a clean mind, and in our Western world full of impressions and things on which to land our gaze, a sanctuary is a welcome oasis for the senses. Therefore, from my experience, and that of my wise teachers, I highly recommend that you keep your home clean and clutter-free so that you may facilitate emptiness and space.

My home is filled with dirty dishes and clothes everywhere from time to time. The cup cannot be emptied without having been filled. Clutter will come! Accept that cycle and flow with it rather than holding on to the temporary state of cleanliness. Nothing lasts forever! After cleaning, I make sure I know what tea to serve and put the appropriate kettle on with the appropriate amount of water. Then I sit down on the spot I am about to serve tea in and meditate for just a couple of minutes. After that, I open myself to different possible chaxi and try to leave room for the Tea and the Dao to tell me or give me a hint of what the chaxi should be. Then I arrange the chaxi and usually wait for my guests.

The last time I served tea to my friends however, things got a little out of hand. I woke up in the morning for meditation and went through my morning routine. After this, I started cleaning for my guests, to welcome them into my home and to show them

that they are special and that it is an honor to serve them. This is really what we all do when we have guests over, as Wu De has pointed out often. Whether it is a party or your grandmother coming over for some Swedish *fika*, we like to display a clean home. And to clean is to brew tea. That is one of the many things Tea has taught me. Tea preparation does not start when I sit down and lift the kettle, lay out the chaxi or even start cleaning. It is beginningless, an accumulation of all that I do in my whole life. From taking out the trash to doing laundry. Now, back to the main story... This time I cleaned a little bit too intensely and ended up being a little late and not exactly smelling like a bouquet of fresh roses. I had to shower, and it just so happened that my guests were arriving at that exact moment. I excused myself and jumped into the shower, leaving my guests waiting for a little while. No damage was done. The situation, whether I liked it or not, had taken a toll on me.



A little stress was building up, and I couldn't help but feel guilty that I hadn't finished on time. In this situation, my own will to make the setting for tea "perfect" actually caused me to compromise the spirit of Tea—the spirit of "this moment is enough." In a way, I let the very will to do something for my guests become a disservice to them. Stressing about making everything as good as possible or wishing that you had more time to prepare is not the answer. As the Buddha said, we must not let medicine become another sickness.

I recently read a Zen story where a noble wanted to invite Lu Yu himself for tea. The tea was very well suited to water from the Tiger's Eye, a pool in the Yellow River, but the noble's servants spilled some of the water on the way home back from the spring. They scooped up some water from near the shore to replace it. Lu Yu drank the tea and closed his eyes, the moment in itself perfect. The noble then said that

this was tea made with water from the Tiger's Eye. Lu Yu smiled, not wishing to criticize his host. But the noble pressed the old master, and so Lu Yu asked the noble if he possibly had been a little unmindful and spilled some of the water on the way back. The noble was ashamed when the servants admitted what had happened. However, Lu Yu proclaimed that criticism alone could ruin tea more than bad water ever could. Relating this to my situation, I realized I should have accepted that I couldn't clean everything and that what I had time for was enough. It is more important to give tea space, time and a calm mind than to strain yourself trying to make everything perfect. There is no such thing as perfect. The most important element in tea is our mind, not the color of our *chabu* or what flowers we have in our vase. And yet, if our chaxi comes from the right mindset, the session will unfold in the right space, time and with the right mind.

An old student was working in the garden when his master dropped by unannounced for a visit. He casually clipped a flower and placed it in a simple vase as his chaxi. The student then served tea from his heart, with no time to clean or decorate, other than the flower. Like him, we too must be ready to serve tea at all times. This, of course, leads to us wanting to maintain a home that is clean and ready to receive guests. But more importantly, the student accepted the moment as it was. They say that after tea his master declared that he was a student no more, impressed by the student's understanding that we serve tea with both nothing and everything in mind.





Creating a Tea Space

✿: **Raneta Coolakova**

One summer's day in 2017, when I was living and serving at Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan, we were expecting a visit from a master who made Yixing kettles for us—an exciting occasion. We would finally see the results after many months of designing and adjusting the length of the spout, the height of the handle and other important details of our kettles. Gongfu was chosen as the method of serving tea as it is more familiar to Taiwanese than large bowls and would therefore allow the guests to fully enjoy their tea. When my teacher was preparing the tea stage, he took an old antique Yixing teapot, placed a few purple chrysanthemums in it and put it on the edge of the table. The teapot became a vase and a part of the scene, emphasizing the theme of the meeting and celebrating the long-awaited result. It's probably worth mentioning that not only were the flowers purple, but the color of the *chabu* was also purple. Why? Yixing clay is also called purple-sand clay. That moment often pops up in my memory as an example of an elegant and conscious approach to creating a stage for tea. There was nothing accidental in any of the ele-

ments, every detail shone with meaning, and it still takes my breath away to remember it.

For me, this is a representation of what the art of creating a chaxi might be: wordless communication, one more layer of transmitting a sense and intention. It is subtle at first, but when you notice it and it touches you to the very depths of your soul, you understand how important it is to tea.

Creation of a tea stage grows out of the skill to arrange beautifully the objects for a tea ceremony into art that carries a message, an idea. In a traditional Japanese tea room there is a *tokonoma*, an alcove decorated with hanging calligraphy, an ink painting, a simple floral piece in a vase or a Buddha. Hanging scrolls (*kakejiku*) are frequently seen adorning the *tokonoma* where tea ceremonies have been held since the fourteenth century. Decorating the tea space became popular when Sen no Rikyū mentioned the importance of scrolls. Changing *kakejiku* to match the guests, seasons and the time of day became customary. Tea people came to think that it was important to express the formality of the guests or occasions by displaying various kinds

of scrolls and flower arrangements. What is the meaning of the *tokonoma*? Originally, it was developed from the altar in Zen Buddhist priests' living spaces. It conveys a sense of sacredness, respect and an appreciation for both art and Nature. And sharing this sense with others in a Zen way, beyond words, without dependence upon words or letters is very conducive to tea. Of course, you don't need an actual *tokonoma* to put these concepts into practice. We all have an amazing place for daily practice: our tea space, no matter where it is, how big it is, or even how permanent. It doesn't matter if you have a small table in the corner of the room or a whole room dedicated to tea ceremony—you can practice anywhere. Just like some people take their shower every morning, or follow some other routine that is so natural that it happens automatically when they wake up, we Chajin similarly clip a flower from the garden, choose a scroll of calligraphy and set up our tea space. This is a beautiful practice that helps remind us to respect ourselves, the space, the occasion and the guests that might come for tea. As part of a daily practice, it can change our lives.





A *tokonoma* alcove is a very important metaphor to bring to the art of Chaxi, even if we don't have such an alcove in our tea space. It can be a great metaphor for creating a chaxi and for the spirit of tea. What are the key points that we can adopt from the *tokonoma* concept when creating our tea space?

床の間

- 茶 To express an idea of respect, concern and hospitality.
- 茶 A wonderful opportunity to celebrate the season and enjoy the gifts of Nature.
- 茶 It creates an atmosphere, evokes feelings in the person appreciating it.
- 茶 It puts special objects in the spotlight, instead of making them compete for attention with dozens of others.
- 茶 Through limiting the number of displayed elements, it helps to approach the process consciously and with attention. This also adds value to space.
- 茶 If you rotate your tea tools, you always have a fresh look.
- 茶 It shows our guest that we were thinking of them and that this time together is important to us. We invested time preparing. Life is made up of many small moments, and they are as worth celebrating as the so-called "great" occasions. In the end, we will have many more Mondays in life than Christmas Days or major achievements.



First Things First

Returning from the alcoves invented in medieval Japan, we come to our tea tables in the twenty-first century. But before we dive into all the important details of chaxi, I have a favor to ask. Dear friend, maybe you are now at the very beginning of your tea journey, fascinated by the beauty and nobility of this practice. Perhaps you are looking forward to exploring the limitless world of tea with trepidation and excitement. Congratulations for embarking on this incredible journey that will offer you so much more than you could ever imagine. If you feel that you are at the very beginning, please put this article aside and come back in six months or a year. (I keep my old magazines for such re-reads.) Let me explain: The most important and primary focus of practice is tea itself. Always. Tea is so simple and yet so complex. We choose a tea to brew and a method and this

will define and influence the next few hours of our life, and perhaps the lives of others as well. And everything else follows. Take the time to get to know tea, to sit with it simply, perhaps leaves in a bowl or using some other simple brewing method. There is no need to start with complexity and every reason to start simply—just leaves, water and heat. After you feel comfortable with tea brewing and are ready to improve your tea, you can then start focusing on chaxi. Walking the Way of Tea is a very humbling experience. The further you go, the more you realize how much there is still to learn and discover. Don't feel like you must reach a certain level to start a chaxi practice. That isn't what I am saying, just a suggestion to keep tea simple in the beginning.

If you drive, you might not remember it anymore, but when you were learning, it was overwhelming and

exhausting. Paying attention to every detail inside and outside the car, from the signs and lights, other cars, people, etc., was difficult. My brother recently went to driving school, and in the beginning, he was so occupied with driving itself that he couldn't imagine listening to music or talking while driving. All his attention was occupied with driving. Now, a year later, my brother can listen to scientific books while driving and notice clouds and birds, read slogans on billboard, for example. What happened? Obviously, he practiced and slowly, day after day, his ability to perceive a large number of dynamically changing events at the same time has become a skill, muscle memory. I'm sharing this as a reminder that we don't have to get everything at once, and the desire to learn everything all at once can get in the way. Impatience won't serve us in a tea practice.

Sometimes it is better to take one step after another and slowly expand the boundaries of perception and possibilities. With a relaxation into the journey itself comes confidence, and we train ourselves to do much more than before. I think this is good news. Don't you? It means we can learn and perfect our skills if we put in the effort, time and attention. We can do so at a natural pace, focusing on what we are doing now rather than where we are trying to get to.

In our tea practice, we also have a lot of things going on and our ability to see them, noticing changes and reacting to them fully and naturally, depends on awareness, experience and practice. At the beginning of the journey, you learn to get a jet of hot water from the kettle into an open teapot—not somewhere in the vicinity, but right in the center. You learn to stop perfectly on time, and pour as much water as you need. You learn to regulate the speed and strength of the flow—some teas need a strong, pow-

erful jet, while others are better gently and slowly enveloped by water. Then you learn to pour water with smooth circular movements, like in Qigong practice. To hone such skills means that you will be able to repeat this action in the same way, smoothly and naturally, like driving. Each movement does not happen by itself, but with full presence and understanding. Even in a simple action like pouring water into the teapot there are so many layers to learn and explore. And I just described an action that takes a few seconds to do. Tea brewing consists of hundreds of such small movements, each of which has a meaning and can be a little more complicated than it seems at first glance. So first things first: We need to learn about tea and tea brewing. Of course, a space prepared with intention is one that it is easier to practice in, so some focus on the chaxi can be helpful even as a beginner, but it is better to put more energy into learning tea in the beginning so that the art of chaxi supports a life of tea, not vice versa.

Even within a given tea ceremony, we must choose a tea first. Learning how to do so is a whole other article, so let's assume you have a tea and move on to creating the space to serve it in.

Theme

To start with, it helps to think of the chaxi literally as a tea stage. The stage can be a table or the floor, the area around the teapot—wherever the tea service is taking place. Right in front of us is a stone, wooden, glass or metal surface. It is rough or smooth; warm or cold; it is acoustically dead or resonant, glossy or matte; it is transparent, opaque, patterned or with color. All of these elements will then be part of our tea, the background of the performance or the canvas on which our painting will be created. The most important question then becomes: What do you want it to be? What stage will create the right mood and atmosphere to bring out the tea in the best possible way?



When we answer this question, it gives us a sense of direction. Maybe this is the perfect surface, and we'll leave it just as it is, putting the teapot and bowl in the center and stopping. Or perhaps we will get a tea runner, a *chabu*, a wooden plank or stone block. Just asking what we want our tea space to be and then setting out to create it adds intention to our tea, changes our experience of tea and offers transformative insights into our life.

After we have laid the foundation, it's time for the essentials: Teaware and tools that are directly connected to tea brewing, like a kettle, tea boat, teapot, bowls or cups, waste water basin, tea in a scoop or bowl, utensils, a tea towel, trivets, and so on. We then raise our eyes from the table and the tea utensils and feel the atmosphere. The whole room participates in a tea gathering: how it smells, how the light is reflected on the surfaces, what is on the shelves—all of this creates an atmosphere and has a pronounced effect on the state of mind of the guests

and the brewer. Tea in an empty white room full of light will be different from tea in a dark room where a ray of light spotlights steam rising above the cups. Even the same tea brewed in two such spaces would taste completely different. On some level, there is no suitable or unsuitable environment, the question is always the same: What helps to create the right mood and atmosphere to bring out the tea in the best possible way? Aside from the foundation (the table or floor), the surface we are brewing on (*chabu*, stone or wood) and the tea and teaware, the main tools we use to create a *chaxi* are:

- 茶 Light and shadows
- 茶 The gifts of Nature: flowers, bonsai, stones, rocks, etc.
- 茶 Music or silence
- 茶 Incense or no smells
- 茶 Space itself

Each of these tools can have a powerful impact, may not change anything or may bring disturbing feelings and spoil the experience. As in all things tea: practice makes perfect.

Once, in Estonia, I was invited for tea by my tea sister, Elina. It was meditative tea. We didn't talk, listening to music instead. At the end of the session, the peaceful music changed to a soft and gentle song from my Motherland. It felt like a wave of honey had washed over me from head to toe. Elina had made a playlist in advance and found a song that spoke directly to me. There was so much care, attention and tenderness in this small gesture. And I clearly remember this touching moment of recognition, so much so that even now, many years later, tears come to my eyes. There are so many ways in which you can influence other people's experiences in tea. There are so many small gestures of nonverbal kindness, hospitality and love that can touch so deeply; and sometimes those feelings will stay with them for years...



The Foundations of Chaxi



茶席的基礎

Philosophy

When we pay attention, whatever we are doing... is transformed and becomes a part of our spiritual path. We begin to notice details and textures that we never noticed before. Everyday life becomes clearer, sharper and at the same time more spacious. —Rick Fields

There are three foundations for creating a tea space: the practical, the aesthetic and the spiritual. They grow one from the other and are not mutually exclusive, as it may seem at first glance, but rather complement one other. Every single tea person on this planet creates some kind of chaxi on the *practical* level, knowingly or unknowingly, you just can't avoid it. When you choose teapot and cup and bring it to a tea spot—well, congratulations, you just made a simple chaxi. As with everything in the world of tea, this can be done mindfully with knowledge and awareness or be simply ignored and done as a matter of routine. When you think about it deeply, everyone follows some philosophy or other, and the one that has had no

intention, thought or will applied to it is perhaps the worst philosophy of all. Maybe the same is true of chaxi. Once, I saw twenty books in a bookstore that were all about how to sleep properly. I couldn't help but laugh. Why would we need books about something everyone knows how to do and does every day quite successfully? Out of curiosity, I read one of these books a couple of years ago and it changed not only how I sleep, but also when and what I eat, how I exercise and even how I travel. In fact, it has greatly affected my life. Something I thought couldn't be improved with attention, care and learning was actually a doorway to a whole world of wonder that improved my life—because, you know... it's all interconnected.

The practical approach to a creating a tea stage is functional. You need tools to brew tea, so you get out all you need and arrange it on your stage in the most practical way, so that everything is at hand, convenient and functional. You must know how it will be used to allow ample space for it. The perfect chaxi on a functional level is when you have everything in the right place be-

fore you start, so that during the tea ceremony you don't have to leave the table or ask someone to hand you the *jian shui* or fetch a tea towel; you have everything you need to fully immerse yourself in the process of preparing tea and serving the guests.

When guests come to sit in a room to share tea together, they are offering us something extremely precious, something that isn't recoverable once given: their time and attention. Our task is to use that time and attention as well as possible, and make the experience rewarding for them. So, if you're going to gift people with a wondrous time together, you first have to spend some time preparing. Rambling is not an option. Interrupt the ceremony because "oh, I forgot something" is also not an option. When we make tea for others, we need a list of everything we need ahead of time. We can then run through each step in our mind's eye from start to finish and make sure we have everything we need before we start. All this preparation pays off a hundredfold in the tea. The energy we invest in preparation changes the ceremony itself, in other words.



Aesthetics

There is one thing in the world where there is no culture gap: *beauty*. Whether you are American, Russian or Chinese, we all understand and feel beauty. It is a deep and human part of our aesthetics and emotions. Being human, we are receptive to beauty, and it touches the very depths of our being, allowing us to respond and open up. I think whatever we do—be it music, tea or design—this is a key element. Preparation for a celebration looks the same everywhere on this planet: we clean and decorate the space. At every level of the human experience, we are looking for the beautiful, something that gives meaning to our souls, not just our physical needs. We head outdoors to share tea in Nature because we yearn to commune with the beautiful. We crave the sublime, and that's why the starting point for all things tea is the beautiful, not just the practical. Beautiful moments are available to us whenever we want them. All we have to do is open our eyes. A petal that has fallen on the table, curls of steam over a cup of tea, a ray of sunshine gliding

across the room, the sound of the water starting to boil in the kettle, the deafening songs of birds outside—the more clearly we are able to perceive the existing beauty, the more we are able to enhance the beauty of the moment in the tea room. Don't let the beauty of life escape you. See the world as the temple that it is. And your tea place is an altar of beauty over which you have full reign. The more you notice beauty in your home, your life and in the world, the better you will be at decorating, at inviting this beauty into your tea space.

Spirituality

Setting up a tea space is like building a mandala. The word “mandala,” originally a Sanskrit word, simply means a “circle,” and, by extension, a “world.” In the Buddhist traditions, mandalas are also symbolic circles that represent the entire world in a microcosm. A mandala is often created from fine multi-colored sand, placed grain by grain in an intricate circle. Creating a sand mandala can take weeks and

requires intense concentration, but the ritual practice requires the mandala be destroyed or dismantled after its completion. The impermanence of all created things is enacted here in the painstaking creation of an intricate, exquisite work of art, and its destruction. A symbolic world comes into being, grain by grain, and then passes away—swept up and returned to the formless from whence it came.

The most incredible thing is that all parts of the process—from the very first steps of creating a drawing, to the final ritual destruction—are equally important and beautiful. Not just the moment when the mandala is ready and flawless, but every moment that leads to it is equally poignant. Eventually, the smooth and perfect lines are ritually swept away and become a multi-colored mess, which is also beautiful in its own way. A mandala is a practice that combines the best of meditation, offerings and purification in one very powerful act. Do you notice how much this is like a tea practice in essence? A symbolic world comes into being, bowl by bowl, and then naturally passes away.

You bring elements into an empty space, creating a harmonious, flawless stage on which the tea blossoms. You allow tea to fill all the innermost folds of your heart, saturate the mind and soul, fill the body with joy and peace. Everything arises, happens and then disappears. Naturally and beautifully, the tea session comes to an end. Everyone who participated will have a beautiful imprint in his or her heart, the same as people observing the creation of a mandala. And for the brewer, approaching a tea ceremony as a part of his or her spiritual practice offers the most transparent mirror one could ever wish for. Our state of mind influences the way we move, act and talk—everything we do, everything we create. When serving tea to others, we can clearly see our state of mind, mental habits and tendencies. But the best thing is that with every sip of tea we become more peaceful and closer to harmony. Therefore, even if for some reason we start the session feeling somewhat excited, we will end in a place of calm and balance.

To finish this article, I would like to share three of the most useful tips that I have spied from tea masters I've been lucky to observe:

One of the best tips I've learned about creating a tea stage is to add elements slowly, listening to the space, intention and objects interact with each other. When we bring all the elements in gradually, one by one (not all at once), the chaxi grows, instead of tumbling together, and ultimately turns out a little differently than it would otherwise. This means doing everything at the right speed. Instead of striving to do things faster, slower movements allow us to focus on doing things better. Often, that means slowing down and spending the right amount of time on the things that matter most to you. How should I express my intention? How can I use the elements I have? What color or texture will highlight my idea? More often than not, slowing down reminds us that less is indeed more. Such minimalism can sometimes be surprising. In reality, negative space is precisely what generates the beauty. This emptiness, which isn't really empty, is beautiful in its own right. And when you do things slowly, you can feel it. Hopefully, your guests will feel it as well.

The second tip is that if you are lucky to have guests and share tea with others, then after you set up chaxi, go around the table and look at the result from the guests' perspective. You will be surprised! Perhaps some elements will need to be moved or changed. Quite often, looking from the other side of the table helps to create a more balanced and harmonious tea stage. We get stuck in the host's perspective, even though we are trying so hard to honor the guests.

The third tip is a quick test of whether you have managed to create a harmonious chaxi or not. As in the second tip, you walk around the table, sit in a guest's seat and close your eyes for a couple of seconds. Breathe... Then slowly open your eyes. What is the very first thing that catches your eye? This is the center of attraction of your chaxi. What should be at the center of attraction of any tea stage? The tea—perhaps leaves in a bowl or the teapot. The center should not be a flower vase, a scroll or a gorgeous sculpture. If your chaxi is created in such a way that the eyes are drawn to the tea, well done, you did it! Tea is always the star of our show. If we lose the tea in favor of the chaxi, or any of its elements, we have swapped the background and foreground and our chaxi has become overdone. This is an easy mistake to make in the beginning of our practice. This tip can really help us to catch the times when we add too many or overly distracting elements and then we can take them out so the tea can better shine front and center.

When you return to the host's seat, remember that the center is also not you, sitting there in the center and serving tea. The center of gravity should be Tea Herself and all else orbits Her. Make sure your movements never draw attention to yourself, pulling your guests' attention away from their tea, for the experience is their own. Tea has her own messages to share.







Allowing Nature in

茶人: Matthew Grohne

It is late spring in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In the human-organized realms of urban and suburban environments, rhododendrons large and small burst with red, pink, purple, and white blossoms, dogwoods and magnolias offer whites and pale pinks, and camellia (not *sinensis*) blooms of various hues have come and gone. Wild pacific rose can be seen along walking and cycling trails, offering a sweet, spicy aroma to passersby, as do the Himalayan blackberries, an invasive vining species that has become ubiquitous in the region and is now showing its first white blossoms. It has been a wet and relatively cool start to the year, leading to abundant new growth and, even in many areas characterized by concrete and human intervention, a sense of being embraced by the freshness of the season.

Find your way outside of the cities and into the forests (which, thankfully, are never too far away) and that freshness is still abundant—even more so—but the landscape that one finds is organized according to different principles. Gone is the intentional placement of particular trees for shade or aesthetic effect, or flowers planted to yield a rolling rotation of color throughout the spring and summer months. Towering Douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock, which

provide the highest canopy, display bright green tips to their dark green branches and are distributed throughout the forest at uneven intervals. The flowers of big leaf maple have dropped from their branches and lie desiccated on the forest floor, as do large moss-covered branches that fell in the wind and rain of the previous months. Dark pink salmonberry blooms are beginning to appear, with some early flowers having already withered and given way to orange berries. Sword ferns send up fiddleheads, which unfurl into new fronds to replace those laid low by the previous winter's heavy snow and ice—no pruning to be seen. And the sound of various birds is much more apparent: dark-eyed juncos, Steller's jays, pacific wrens, varied thrushes and the occasional haunting call of a great horned owl or pileated woodpecker, which call to alert others to the present conditions of the forest itself. Do these sounds come from inhabitants of the forest, or are they part of the forest itself?

The practice of chaxi involves honoring the occasion by creating an aesthetic—a sense of beauty—in the experience of tea, often through one's choice of runners, flowers, plants, clothing, music, teaware and other decorations. The inspiration for these decisions may come from many different sources, but it is common to

bring elements of Nature into the tea space by incorporating flowers, bonsai, rocks and even animals (often in representational form through paintings or statues, though I heard Yurtle the Turtle once sat still for a short tea session at the Tea Sage Hut). Chaxi seeks to create a sensory environment appropriate to the time, place and people present in order to inscribe upon the experience a sense of significance and meaning. Given that the seasons are ever present and inherently tied to a particular time and place, some elements of this can often be a popular choice and an easy way to begin a chaxi practice. However, when one intends to bring Nature into the tea space, to what degree is one actually doing so? In creating a chaxi, one might use various natural symbols that point to an idea of Nature, but to what extent do those symbols and representations give one a sense of the unbounded, unlimited and ultimately incomprehensible Nature that lies behind and beyond the symbol? How well does one's mental representation of Nature align with the complexity of reality?

Where humans exert less control, Nature organizes itself according to the conditions that are present, celebrating itself and honoring each moment in a perfectly appropriate way. Flowers bloom in their season, water flows where the structure of the forest al-



lows, and trees grow where chipmunks bury seeds and an opening in the canopy provides enough light, among countless other conditions. Living in accordance with these conditions and fulfilling their ecological roles, each element and being creates their own significance and meaning without effort and in perfect harmony with the time, place and occasion, since all ideas of harmony and disharmony spring forth from the mind. This means that even if something does not adhere to one's expectations based on the calendar or location, the manifestation in that moment is still in harmony with its own—and with Nature's—self-organizing principles.

Where Nature is adept at organizing and honoring through effortlessness, humans tend to need practice—especially in the modern world, where an inordinate amount of attention is given to conceptually-mediated realities and people tend to relate to ideas of objects (or beings, or themselves, or Nature) as if it *is* the thing itself. However, if one's idea or concept is only superficial, it is a little like claiming to love someone who you have not taken the time in getting to know and understand. Understanding is not only the foundation of love, but it is in itself a form of love, and is necessary to truly honor anything. Spending time away from predictable, conceptually-based

structures of time and place—clock time, roads and social norms—and instead observing the changing of the seasons and all that accompanies them can help one to come to a greater understanding of the Nature that one seeks to honor through chaxi, as well as to realize one's own embeddedness in the primordial flow of existence from which one is never apart, even when living a more conceptually-driven life.

Perhaps we need to first soften awareness and lean into the moment as it is, cultivate a true love of Nature and then allow an effortlessness to the creation of a tea aesthetic. This is not the same as the inattentive looseness that accompanies unexamined habits, but is rather a closer and fuller examination of what one seeks to point toward in a Nature-themed chaxi. We should ask ourselves: What does it mean to celebrate? What is an occasion? What is a season? What is a forest? What is Nature, and what is my relationship to it?

According to one story, the son of the tea master Sen no Rikyū spent all morning sweeping the *roji*, the garden path, pulling weeds and pruning bushes in preparation for the guests who would arrive later in the day. Once he had finished, he summoned his father, who indicated his disapproval. The son returned to weeding and pruning, completing his work even more

thoroughly than before. When Rikyū returned, he indicated that his son had failed to understand his previous failure and stated, “Let me show you how to clean a *roji*.” He then reached up to a branch overhead and shook it, scattering autumn leaves across the path. Rikyū's story highlights not only imperfection *as* perfection and effortless action, but also the self-organizing character of Nature, which can only come from letting go into something unanticipated and unplanned—perhaps unplannable, as it is born purely of the conditions of that moment. At some level, to create a chaxi that truly imbues a sense of relationship with Nature, one needs to expand one's ideas and concepts about Nature, letting go of the rigidity and control that characterizes the conceptual mind and cultivate the same effortlessness that dictates where a stream will flow or a fallen leaf will land. In order to do so, time spent outdoors is helpful, and so is tea drinking, meditation or other such activities that lead beyond the conceptual mind. In that way, a chaxi can be a circular path leading to the aware, yet spontaneous flow of Nature while ultimately expressing that beauty as well.





Simplicity Through Chaxi

茶人: Shen Su (聖素)

The tea stage, or *chaxi*, is there to help facilitate the tea ceremony. It is a creative and functional expression of the tea ceremony itself. That expression is a balance between function and form, helping you brew a graceful and beautiful cup of tea for your guests. To achieve this kind of balance, there are compromises that we must navigate as we learn the art of chaxi. On one end of the spectrum is an overly decorative, cluttered and dysfunctional chaxi that attempts to fulfill a purpose by adding more than is necessary. That is an easy line to cross when beginning our chaxi practice, and probably the most common mistake made by the enthusiastic Chajin, or person of tea. If we are too focused on the theme, the mind and its meaning, we can go overboard with the decorations or forget about function and put decorations in the way of serving tea. That is a mistake all of us have made at some point. On the other end of the spectrum is a lackluster attempt at creativity, one that fails to convey any feeling or sentiment and is put together lazily or out of routine. Sometimes we use spontaneity or intuition as an excuse to neglect proper planning. Such chaxi are uninspiring and fail to rouse the inner spirit of curiosity and beauty that befalls a guest

when they encounter a beautiful chaxi. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint, such chaxi are missing something—the spark that ignites the soul and brings a tea session to life.

Between those two ends of the spectrum is a Goldilocks point of balance where just the right arrangement of elements is chosen to express a feeling as well as facilitate graceful tea brewing. This can be a difficult point of balance to achieve, the point where function meets form in perfect harmony without too much or too little. This is essentially learned through practice and feedback from a teacher and from watching the reaction of your guests (or perhaps discussing it with them at a later date if they are close friends). Ultimately, like most things tea, the art of chaxi is a lesson in simplicity.

Simplicity

Simplicity is the foundation of beginning any tea stage. If you're going to exercise simplicity as a principle throughout your chaxi practice, you want to start with a blank canvas. Doing so has taught me a number of lessons about life and tea. Before placing *anything* in the tea space or choosing the elements or tea utensils, I seek

emptiness and simplicity—both within and without. In fact, the first thing I do is remove everything from the tea table and settle my mind. It is difficult to achieve simplicity if your tea space has anything on it and if your mind is cluttered. Chaxi has taught me to always clear the space and my mind. That means I wipe the space down with a towel and fresh water, dust around and make sure all is clean and pure. I then take a moment and breathe, calmly relaxing my mind. In this way, I become receptive to the details that allow me to best serve my guests and the occasion. When I am open and relaxed, I can then consider who is coming for tea, what tea to choose and what brewing method is suitable for the occasion. With that in mind, I can choose a theme to help guide the creation of the tea stage that will help me to honor this unique encounter and chance for connection.

Creating Simply

Creating the tea stage is where we really start the more tangible part of the process. There are so many different wares and decorative elements to choose from and endless ways to arrange them to express a desired theme.



Here we are faced with the challenge of over-decorating our tea stage with too many objects. This is easy to do if we forget about the importance of simplicity. Every element placed on the tea table should in some way serve three functions: facilitate the service of tea, draw our attention to the center of the stage (to the tea), which helps to clearly define the subject of the ceremony, and harmonize the chosen theme. If the elements we are placing on the stage do not fulfill these three functions, they are probably superfluous. There are no neutral elements. If an element is not helping, it's detracting from the chaxi in some way. The most common mistake I have made is to add too many elements to my tea stage. My teacher almost always removes an element (or two) when I ask for help and once he does things always look and feel better. In this way, I slowly learn to keep things simple as I try to define the theme with as few elements as possible. This leaves the stage open as well, unfinished and incomplete, which reflects the impermanence of the world and lives we inhabit.

Sometimes a single flower, or even a few petals, are more expressive than an entire bouquet. It's also not necessary to use the same go-to elements every time, such as a tea pillow, tea scoop, stick or lid rest, to name a few. Stay curious and creative with your tea stage; creativity and simplicity can certainly complement each other. As you add elements, stand back from time to time to get a different perspective on your design. Walk around the tea space and view it from different angles. Close your eyes and calm down and then reopen them to look at the space fresh, noticing where your eyes are naturally drawn. Ask yourself how it feels in terms of the above three functions, and if it centers the tea and brings harmony to the chaxi. In doing so, you start to develop an intuitive feeling for the balance you are trying to achieve, while also checking your work to prevent adding too many elements. Try adding things slowly, one at a time. Then also try taking them away in order to compare. Trust in space and in emptiness, for it is simplicity that quiets the mind and allows us to better enjoy tea. Don't worry if you must rearrange or remove elements as you progress; that's natural and part of the creative process. Some-

times you may even need to scrub the entire stage and start fresh. Sometimes it isn't the theme or elements that were disharmonious, but rather the mind that put them together. Forcing a design that isn't working will end up feeling contrived and imbalanced. Simplicity comes from being open to change as it is needed. Meditate and try again with a fresh breath and clear heart-mind.

On the other hand, it's easy to over-correct and end up with a stage that is dull, lackluster, vague or seemingly careless. We can also get stuck in a perfectionism—that won't do. Let the work be incomplete, unfinished and an open expression of the perfection of imperfection, the glory of impermanence and the balance between order and chaos. You can't just remove elements from your stage for the sake of removing and call that "simplicity." The unadorned is an intentional, yet free-flowing aesthetic that comes with practice. The reason we often add too many elements in the beginning is because it is harder to achieve what we have in mind with less, so we take the easy route and overcompensate by adding more. This can cause us to become too strict and keep things overwhelmingly spartan. These balancing techniques are like the shifting of the tightrope walker's balancing pole. It is all a necessary part of cultivating a solid chaxi practice. We must cross the boundaries in order to understand where they are so that we can learn to navigate them intuitively, freely and as second nature. Only then can we focus on our intention, theme and the details that spontaneously arise from our chosen aesthetic. The more we meditate, drink tea and awaken, the easier this becomes. Certainly, the more awake we are, the more our creative endeavors are a reflection of an awake heart-mind, and therefore inspire and guide others to their awakening. There are times and places for more abundant tea stages, or tea stages with nearly no elements at all, but those require a foundation of basic skills upon which to build.

Perhaps you don't have a wide selection of chaxi elements to choose from, but this can actually be to your benefit because it forces you to be creative with what you have, or better yet, to repurpose something for your tea stage

that wasn't originally intended for that purpose—that is one of the great joys of a tea lover. Necessity is the mother of creativity. A simple, creative and functional tea stage will impart the same sense of clarity and ease with which you started the entire process. And learning to shuffle around the same wares in unique combinations teaches us to not take things for granted, or get stuck in habits, thinking we know things. There are always richer, deeper, more subtle and nuanced worlds to explore within anything. Sometimes, when we get to know something or someone we dismiss them and lose our awe and curiosity, our wonder and appreciation for them. Moving "the same" wares around in different patterns keeps things fresh and reminds us to celebrate our old friends and special, unique occasions, so that we don't miss our one chance.

Finishing Simply

Sometimes we define (and limit) a tea session to the act of tea drinking. But the more we invite tea into our life as a daily practice, the more those boundaries blur and then dissolve. Does tea start when you start the kettle? At the first cup or the last? Did it begin when you woke up the morning of? Calling anything "the beginning" is arbitrary, of course. There is no fixed starting point, nor is there a fixed ending point to a tea session.

In the same way my chaxi practice taught me to clean before guests arrive, so too did it teach me that it is important to clean after they leave. It's especially important *not* to clean while they are still around, otherwise it may indirectly indicate to them that they should leave. Cleaning up doesn't necessarily mean removing everything and calling it a day, though there is nothing wrong with that. Instead, you may want to try intentionally leaving some elements of the chaxi on your table to honor the session that has concluded and serve as a reminder to sit for future sessions. We call this a "secondary chaxi." Of course, you should properly clean the teaware used during the session. A secondary chaxi is not about being lazy. Sometimes we leave some of the bare essential elements in



a way that suggests what happened—maybe a few bowls neatly lined up in the middle of the runner, or perhaps only a vase and flower leaning towards an open space at the center where the tea once was. There is no recipe here. Like a chaxi, a secondary chaxi is open-ended and free. In that way, the end of one tea session leads into the next and there is no beginning or end, just a cycle of change, flowing impermanence and one tea session we call “life.”

Simple Serenity

Throughout the process of designing, creating and finishing a tea stage, I especially like to contemplate simplicity. I don’t just mean as a concept, but as a feeling, an aesthetic. I like to think about what makes me feel calm and serene and use that to help create a theme. What natural setting comes to mind that instills a sense of ease, relaxation and peace? Maybe an open meadow with summer grass gently

swaying in the wind; a simple thatched hut in the woods with smoke billowing out the chimney; a clear and open beach met with soft waves that extend around a distant corner; or a peaceful pond surrounded by moss-covered rocks and lily pads with blue skies that open up beyond towering trees. These are just a few of the open, clean and simple scenes that calm my mind and instill a sense of serenity, which is an excellent state to be in when designing a chaxi, just as when serving tea. In fact, the more our space is imbued with such energy, the easier it will be to feel this way when enjoying tea in that space.

The next step is to actively and playfully try to express that through the use of chaxi elements. How can I express summer grass swaying in the wind or a pond in the forest in a way that also facilitates the service of tea? How can I get my mind out of the way so that the part of me that is as natural as the elements of the forest pond can shine through and do the decorating? There is always a combination of colors, ma-

terials, teaware, symbols and natural elements available to do just that. The materials aren’t important; the heart-mind is. A well-executed chaxi will instill a similar sense of serenity onto your guests as the vision did for you, and while their interpretation of your stage may differ from yours, the core feeling will be the same. If in any way they feel a sense of ease, relaxation and as though they have been honored for this tea session, then you have done your part in setting the stage. The tea will take it from there.

I am grateful for the simplicity that chaxi has taught me. I try to carry them throughout the entire process of setting my tea stages, and beyond that into my daily life because tea lessons are life lessons. In the same way that a tea stage benefits from simplicity, the metaphorical stage we must set for ourselves every day will do the same—the stage on which our lives unfold, on which we are all the players.



TeaWayfarer

Each month, we introduce one of the Global Tea Hut members to you in order to help you get to know more people in this growing international community. We also wish to pay homage to the many manifestations that all this wonderful spirit and Tea are becoming as the Tea is drunk and becomes human. The energy of Tea fuels some great work in this world, and we are so honored to share glimpses of such beautiful people and their Tea. This month, we would like to introduce Polina Kallas.

I look back on the timeline and realize how one plant, *Camellia sinensis*, has been in my life for as long as I can remember.. She has been a part of so many occasions in my life and evolves together with me. She has had many forms, presenting Herself in the flow of life. My first memories drinking tea consciously come from early childhood: slow Sunday mornings in the kitchen, early morning golden sunlight embracing the room with warmth, lending extra magic and dreaminess to the sunbeams stretching out on a kitchen table... I remember delicious golden liquid steaming in a saucer. Because the tea was too hot, I poured it into a saucer to cool down. I remember admiring beautiful floral patterns in gold on the saucer and enjoying red tea with sugar and a slice of lemon. It was common to have a separate bowl of honey or jam that was enjoyed between sips. Time was still and that one moment was everything. I remember the innocent presence of being a child, without any hopes, wishes or plans—just the perfection of the moment.

Time has passed, but even now when I visit my parents I love to drink some hot tea with lemon and honey, bringing back nostalgia for my childhood. Over time, I came to understand that good tea is perfect by itself (without sugar or jam). While studying Eastern healing sciences, Tea showed up in my life again. Working with people, doing consultations and treating patients with relaxation therapies, tea was always shared before and after treatments. It was such a good way to let go from daily work and open up for relaxing body treatments.

Later, Tea showed me a different face, opening up a kingdom through ritual. Even though I had friends who told me about an active tea community in Estonia, somehow the right time to join them was not ripe. Surprisingly, I found out about Global Tea Hut while in the United States. The first thing that really captured my eye was the beauty and harmony created through tea ceremonies. Before even sitting with a hot bowl of tea in my hands, I admired the visual performance of serving tea as an art. Finding out about this Global Tea Hut community and the devoted work that has been done over many years was such an eye-opener. It is mesmerizing to think about the connectivity of all the elements that make this simple leaf such a Divine being.

For me, tea is a lot about presence, finding magic in simplicity and appreciating life as it is. Tea's flavors, aromas and ceremonial beauty are all captivating, enabling me to easily find my way to the present moment. It's much easier to still the mind when all the senses have a concentration point. What a joy it is to sit together with complete strangers and experience that something so simple as tea can unite us! Tea is also my doorway to Nature. Sometimes this is very literal, drinking



🌿👤: Polina Kallas, Estonia

Nature (tea) while out in Nature. So many Nature trips have also been tea trips. Estonia has lots of beautiful and clean Nature, so finding new springs to test out good tea water brings the community here lots of joy. I usually spend half the year in California, where warm winters offer the possibility to have tea ceremonies outside, which is such a blessing. Drinking tea in Nature is my favorite thing to do. After wandering in the forest, hiking in the mountains or adventuring in the desert or bog, I love to find a beautiful spot to enjoy some hot tea. Nature is my second home!

Serving tea to people has brought another layer of experience to my journey. I love the synergy that appears only on that one occasion and will never happen in the same way again, the alertness of the senses when being completely in the moment and the richness of experience that happens naturally when we share tea together.

There are so many subtle layers of how Tea has enriched my life and demonstrated the power of simplicity. Tea helps to keep me connected to Nature, to beauty, to myself and other beings; she also keeps me alert and open to life! A big thank you to this Global Tea Hut community for sharing such profound knowledge on all levels about this ancient medicine and for changing so many lives.

Inside the Hut

COMING SOON TO GLOBAL TEA HUT MAGAZINE

茶主题: Water for Tea

茶主题: Classics of Tea

茶道

茶主题: Tea & Music

茶主题: Rou Shen Cups



The Gongfu Course Level One is up and running. No doubt many of you have already signed up and started the course. We spent a year developing this material, which will be released in three courses. The first two will be online and the third will be held live at locations around the world once enough people have taken Level One and Two of the course. We hope that this course inspires a lifelong passion for gongfu tea. There will be a live Q&A this month for course participants, which will also be recorded.



Dragon Gate is a well-aged Taiwanese oolong that we are offering in a beautiful little Yixing jar. This is a very unique tea, worth sharing on special occasions (with a nice chaxi).



We have some amazing new powdered teas for whisking: two different shou puerh teas. One is Stonehenge and the other is Ancient Highway. Whisking shou is a rare treat, especially an aged one!



We will be sharing a lot of new gongfu teaware on the site, including antique cups, new teapots and a brand new kettle that has been two years in the making. Gongfu course participants receive a discount on gongfu teaware!



We have tentatively set the dates for the annual Zen & Tea Retreat at Casa Cuadrau: October 17–26. You can learn more about the retreat on their website. Wu De will be joined by his friend, Chinese Doctor and Qigong teacher, Dave Melladew. We are hoping for more possibilities for travel and open borders by then so that we can all gather once again in the stunning Spanish mountains for some great tea, meditation, hiking and Qigong. Many of us have been looking forward to this for years!

Center News



We have some amazing news to share: After more than two years, we have finally been granted our non-profit status in the United States. Everything was delayed due to the pandemic. We are still working out the details of what this means, hiring the right accountant and opening the proper accounts to make the transition. There are a lot details to be shared in the future. We will be making more announcements as we learn more about what this means for all of us. We can't wait to take you with us through this wonderful new chapter of our journey. For now, we are very proud to finally pass this hurdle.



We are contemplating opening a teahouse, or multiple teahouses, in the West, especially in the United States, and possibly in Europe too. If you have any ideas of locations or how the teahouses should look, please get in touch. We are also open to collaboration on this and to thinking about locations that are currently not on the radar. There are so many lovely tea communities in North America and Europe that choosing one to set up a teahouse near is going to be up to Fate as much as anything else. We think that it will be a rewarding experience and worth the effort.

July Affirmation

I am grateful

Do I take things for granted? My loved ones? Time spent together? Tea? I will choose to not take anything for granted. I will honor life through beauty and joy.



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