

GONGFU Tea Ceremony Cultivating Calm

by Josie Weaver

The Gongfu Tea ceremony is as much about enjoying good tea as it is about the active choice you can make to set aside life's pressures and remember what you value and hold dear and close to your heart. In my first trip to China, our group was treated to the Gongfu Tea ceremony by various Tea Masters.

“ The place your tea comes from has the Qi of the region, which you take in when you smell it and drink it. ”

At one ceremony, we sat around a table made of what looked like highly polished old wood while the Tea Master prepared the tea. Every gesture of the ceremony has a purpose and meaning. There are specific tools and utensils just for tea-making. As a Westerner who

has always enjoyed tea of every kind, I was riveted. At another GongFu Tea Ceremony, the Tea Master's assistant played a traditional piece of music of the guqin (the ancient Chinese string instrument related to the zither), and the delicate plucking and sliding of the musician's fingers made a haunting music that reminds me of luscious green fields of tea plants in a vast countryside. The Chinese name “Gongfu Tea” ceremony translates to “tea with skill” where the word “gong” means work, and the word “fu” means way or method. Anything can be like that: your “gongfu” of dance or public speaking, for example, means you care about your craft and that you practice and get good at it over time. When you approach things in this manner, you care about details and enjoy the small improvements and moments of revelation and discovery that come from applying yourself and paying high quality attention to elements and features about what you are doing. When you apply this approach to tea-making it means you cultivate an attention to “tea” details—including the tea itself (its many



varieties), water, mood, taste, aesthetics, timing, and friends you enjoy tea with. Each of these contributes to the experience of tea. The ceremony can last for hours as we keep pouring water over the leaves to make a new infusion and take in the conversation when we have tea with friends. Going slowly and enjoying the simple things like the sound of water boiling can nourish us in a deep way. In the Gongfu Tea Ceremony, the teacups are very small, which are intended for momentary tastings and multiple infusions throughout the tea ceremony. The tea ceremony can last for hours, but what can happen is a feeling of losing a sense of time and entering a timeless quiet. When this timeless quiet is shared with friends, the conversation during the tea ceremony can be uplifting and meaningful.

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In learning how to do this with tea (as with anything), there is a level of experimentation. One tea master advises to seek the highest quality ingredients from the most knowledgeable people when choosing tea and equipment. The search does not have to be fussy or expensive as long as we bring a sense of fun and discovery to our exploration of tea.



The most important features of the Gongfu Tea Ceremony are your inner mindset (the state of your “heartmind” or inner attitude that includes your thoughts and feelings), your personal commitment and exploration, and of course the pure tea and water. The essence of the Gongfu Tea Ceremony is the valuing of truly simple things, which indeed are the very things that sustain us.

Gongfu Tea Ceremony

At the heart of the Gongfu Tea Ceremony is an attitude of caring and observing. This takes time, and it can lead to a natural inquiry: what does it mean to make or take time for simple things like drinking a cup of tea? Simple leaves brewed in hot water, only that and nothing else. This amounts to doing only one simple thing. This can be a challenge in our modern-day culture where we rush through things, and where speed is highly rewarded and valued. It can be a weird feeling to speed through things and “get them over with” day after day. You might not even notice this is happening except that things may feel like they require a lot of energy to do and get through, or impatience starts to settle into whatever is going on. But what is really happening as you rush, or when you start to feel you are not fast enough to keep up? It is as if you are using one experience to “get” to the next one. At worst, it feels that there is not enough time, and this can feel like pressure. What if you chose the opposite? What if you chose to do one thing and do it with kindness, patience and attention? This is the inner mindset of the Gongfu Tea Ceremony: Just for a moment, step away from the speediness of life to sit down, breathe, and then brew and drink tea.

Here are the steps that are generally followed in the Gongfu Tea Ceremony with some annotations. See the sidebar for the “short” version with just the steps. Just like in cooking and making something to eat in the kitchen, your experimentation and creativity come naturally over time.

Gongfu Tea Ceremony Steps:

1. Set a time and place for your tea time.
 2. Know your tea to choose your tea.
 3. Procure and arrange your tea utensils.
 4. Have your hot water ready.
 5. Measure your tea and place into the Teapot.
 6. If your tea leaves call for it, you rinse them.
 7. Add the hot water to the tea leaves.
 8. Preheat your tea cups.
- Do the next steps in complete silence.
9. Pour tea into the waiting teacups and offer them to the guests.
 10. Pause just before the first sip.
 11. Take three sips.
 12. Repeat.

Gongfu Tea Ceremony Steps

1. Set a time and place for your tea time.

You can arrange to meet friends or do this for yourself.

2. Know your tea to choose your tea.

Let your tea choice not be guided by convenience alone. This means, be a little curious about what the tea looks like and where it comes from. The tea leaf represents all plants and is the result of the earth and sky (rain) mixing in a divine balance that feeds us physically and spiritually. The place your tea

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comes from has the Qi of the region, which you take in when you smell it and drink it. If tea bags are all you have, take the time to open the bag and gaze at the leaves and get a feeling for what the plant was like before it became tea.

A dear friend recently made a mysterious gift of tea to me at a social gathering. The first thing I did was take the lid off the container to gaze at the leaves and take a good long smell. The shape of the longish leaves was like small twigs with a greenish-gold hue, and the smell was earthy and floral and almost vegetal. It was second harvest Lung Jing (Dragonwell) from Hangzhou, China. My friend is well-connected to friends in China, so this tea, I thought, would be really good. So, I felt my friend's gift of tea needed the slow and proper attention of a tea ceremony, and not the rushed morning commute tea I grab before driving in traffic and facing the work day.

Chinese teas are extremely interesting and varied, and it helps to get recommendations from friends about particular Chinese teas or to visit trusted tea shops in your area. We all have our favorites, and there seems to be a Chinese tea for every possible temperament.

3. Procure and arrange your tea utensils.

Using loose tea leaves to make tea means you will use tea utensils when you make your tea for the ceremony. A teapot, a spoon or small shovel to measure your tea, a strainer, a little pointy device or thin stiff brush for clearing the teapot spout of tea leaves in between infusions, a way to boil your water, and finally the cups. In the actual Gongfu Tea Ceremony, some Tea masters have little statues of animals, flowers, a dark colored towel to wipe drips, and slotted tea table to hold all the equipment. You don't need all of these objects to make tea, but as you prepare your

tea you can invite a playfulness and an appreciation for the right tools for the task. Good tea utensils will feel good in your hands, and they will perform when you need them.

4. Have your hot water ready.

Boiling water is a little-appreciated skill. Tea master Solala Towler says that to boil water you want the water "to dance." So this means, you want fresh water, and you want to get a sense of the water changing from liquid to gas, which is what happens when water boils. There is a sound water makes when it dances, as it turns to steam. This is hard to track in the microwave, so see if you can use a sauce pan that sits on the flame or an electric kettle. A watched pot never boils, but your patience and observation tells you when the water begins to dance and boil. For some teas, this is too hot! So, you want to make note of the temperature your particular tea needs for brewing, and make sure you allow the proper cooling of the dancing water. For example, waiting two to three minutes after water has boiled before pouring over the leaves for green tea is a good idea to avoid bitterness. Black teas usually require boiling water.

5. Measure your tea and place it into the teapot.

When you remove the lid of the tea container, the invitation is to smell the tea leaves and gaze at them to get to know them. The nature and character of the tea tells you how much tea to use for the size of your teapot, and you develop a sense of what this looks like in the tea scoop. When getting to know a tea, be sure to ask for recommendations and to be bold and try variations. Too much or too little tea is equally undesirable.

6. If your tea leaves call for it, you rinse them.

Not all teas require this. But if your tea is to be rinsed (as is the case with red Pu-erh teas), you do this with roughly half a teapot of hot water.

7. Add the hot water to the tea leaves.

Once your water and leaves are together, the brewing process begins. This is a good time to watch leaves uncurl if your teapot is transparent. It is also a good time to simply breathe and contemplate the nature of time and waiting. Either way, it is the time to reflect on the five elements that come into play for all tea brewing: the fire that makes the water hot, the water itself, the wood and twig of the tea, and the earthen clay of our teapot and cups. The element of the metal is not just the kettle, but something else that emerges. The gold of our awareness! Gold is that highly valued substance that can seem hidden in the earth and earthly concerns. It is valuable. Gold represents "present moment" focus or "being in the moment." When we are really there, it is effortless and free, relaxed and alert. We can have this feeling of just being ourselves and feeling a sense of fullness or lightness. It is moments like this that we can enjoy simple things like clouds passing in the sky or the sound of someone's voice or the sound of water dancing.

8. Preheat your tea cups by pouring hot water directly over them and then drying them with your tea towel.

In China, the tea cups are really small to encourage tasting and short multiple infusions of tea. This is different from the hefty mugs Westerners use to enjoy tea. For ceremony, you can use whatever cup you wish. The key is to make it a cup that pleases you in some way – its color, its feel in your hands, its shape and significance of how and when it came into your care. Warm your tea cup with a little dancing water, and then dry the outside.

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Do the next steps in
complete silence...

9. Pour tea into the waiting teacups
and offer them to the guests.



10. Pause just before the first sip.
Hold the tea close to your mouth and
nose, and gaze into the cup for a few
seconds, taking a few breaths.



11. Take three sips.

The first sip is for tasting with the front part of the tongue, the second part is for tasting with the middle part of the tongue, and the final sip is for tasting with the back of the tongue. Taste the tea completely and with your whole self. It is custom to make a slight slurping sound as you take the usually very hot tea from a delicate and small cup. This slurping sound is not rude in China, but a compliment to the Tea Master who prepared the tea. Tasting in such a manner also reminds us to taste the Three Treasures of the tea, the earth where the tea grew, the Qi and energy it took to make it grow and to cultivate it, and the imagination and spirit to craft the tea and share it with humanity.



Enjoy!

Additional Reading:

Cha Dao: The Way of Tea, Tea as a Way of Life
By Solala Towler

The Art and Alchemy of Chinese Tea
By Daniel Reid

The Chinese Art of Tea
By John Blofield