

The Quiet Dignity of Tea

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Before I gave my first introductory lesson on tea drinking at Pathfinder Academy Community School in San Jose, I had to keep reminding myself to stay calm. I felt like I would be exploring totally unknown territory. After all, Pathfinder is not an ordinary place. It is a charter high school primarily for youths who have been in and out of the juvenile justice system or have been rejected by regular schools.

For more than ten years, Tzu Chi volunteers have been visiting Pathfinder once a week to show the students that there are people who care about them. Each week, volunteers serve lunch to students, faculty, and staff, giving them a rare opportunity to learn about some of the many aspects of Chinese culture. However, this visit was the first time these students would be exposed to Chinese tea culture: a gentle, refined custom that is unfamiliar to most Americans, not to mention these hyper-energetic students who never sit still for very long in a classroom. Further complicating the matter, an exam was scheduled for the same day as the visit, and we were told that some students would be absent for the whole day just to avoid taking the exam.

It was a chilly November morning. At the peak of morning rush hour, another volunteer, Nancy Wang, and I spent an hour and a half on the highway before finally arriving at the school. I was a little nervous as we finally got out of the car.

When the bell rang, there were only a few students slouching in their chairs. Latecomers ambled in as if they were early. The wait for the students seemed endless. Nineteen students finally showed up—five more than we expected. In addition, seven teachers and even the principal joined us. As the room was filled with the soothing melody of "Three Variations of Yangguan Pass" being played on the guqin (Chinese zither), we were amazed to see the students slowly begin to sit up straight.

We asked them all to calm themselves through a short meditation: breathing in silence and exhaling with a smile. The students were surprisingly focused, and the room felt like a silent forest. Only the music filled the air. One teacher later told us that it was hard to get these kids to sit quietly for even three minutes. On this day, they stayed attentive for an entire hour.

Imperfection Enriches Flavor

We welcomed each student joyfully and treated them as honored guests. We then told them the legend of "Oriental Beauty" tea.



"Like the tea leaves themselves, the story is both sweet and beautiful. In early summer, small green leafhoppers love to bite the young leaves of the tea trees. Their bites create holes about

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the size of a pinpoint, causing the leaves to curl up and turn yellow. This natural phenomenon produces a unique honey fragrance. While this kind of tea falls into the category of oolong tea, it also resembles black tea in several respects. When prepared, this tea has a red color and a smooth aftertaste. In a transparent tea pot, you can see the tender tea leaves dance about beautifully in the water. As one story goes, Queen Elizabeth II liked the tea so much that she named it Oriental Beauty."

Many of these teenagers grew up deprived of love. With this in mind, we continued the story with a metaphor: "Our life journey is full of imperfect moments but, just like those tea leaves bitten by insects, it can produce a sweet fragrance of maturity. The hills and valleys of our lives make the journey fascinating and worthwhile."

Through detailed examples, we led these youths into the lives of Hakka tea farmers. The students began to appreciate the hard work and care involved in growing and preparing tea, from harvesting the tea at the plantation to processing and brewing.

We then placed dried tea leaves on a spatula and passed it around for close-up appreciation. We also demonstrated the preferred way of holding the spatula to make it easy for the next person to receive it. This gave the students the opportunity to see that even a seemingly trivial action can help make a connection between people. By simply observing tea leaves, the students could learn to appreciate the importance of being considerate to others.

We brought up another important point: Oriental Beauty tea requires insect bites, which precludes the use of pesticides. As a result, tea drinkers can enjoy a refreshing beverage free of pollutants. By this point, the students were all eagerly looking forward to tasting the tea.

VIP Treatment

The tea we brought to the class had been finely selected. First we demonstrated the proper way to serve tea and then invited a few volunteers to come up and serve the principal and teachers. We were all a little shocked when five husky male students stood up to volunteer. They followed our procedures and moves perfectly, without missing any details. They walked in straight lines, made sharp ninety-degree turns, greeted the faculty members with a fifteen-degree bow, and then knelt down to serve them. The whole classroom was filled with smiles, joy, and whispered praise.

This may have been the first time these teachers experienced the Chinese tradition of showing respect to teachers. With a cup of tea in her hand, one of the teachers was so moved that tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. "This makes my whole week worthwhile," she told us.

Later, the students served each other, each treating the others as VIPs. We also taught them a prayer to contemplate while sipping tea: create a good intention during the first sip, then speak kind words, and finally do good deeds. After drinking the tea, we invited everyone to share their thoughts and impressions.

One student said that the feeling of being respected was so good that he decided to treat his

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family the same way. This prompted a teacher to explain, "In the process of growing up, most of these students rarely, if ever, experience the joy of being respected." Volunteer Irene Yang told the students, "If you keep thoughts of gratitude, respect, and love in your mind, they will become second nature. In return, you will be treated with respect and kindness." As final remarks, the principal reminded students that Tzu Chi volunteers come to the school every week. He encouraged students to pay this love forward by giving something back to their community or helping Tzu Chi's efforts.

When the bell rang again, it was time to say goodbye. The students lined up and hugged us one by one to say thank you. Many asked us if they could help clean the room before the next class. To us, they were so kind and innocent. Who said these were troubled youths? I prayed for them, and I hope that this tea-drinking experience will leave them with a warm and profound memory and plant the seeds of kindness.

I strongly believe that as long as they feel respected and cared about, these so-called "troubled youths" will not become a burden to their communities, and society will see fewer troubled families and more kind families devoted to love.

When our mind is calm and still, we will naturally be disciplined. When we are disciplined, we can live in peace and happiness.

~~ Jing Si Aphorism by Dharma Master Cheng Yen ~~

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