

Stress Management and Conflict Resolution via the Way of Tea

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Japan Studies Association Journal (2001), 3, 65-71

The United Nations declared 2000 the International Year for the Culture of Peace. It has also proclaimed this decade the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, thus calling for an 11-year focus on “democracy, tolerance, dialogue, reconciliation, and solidarity.” (Wadlow, 1999).

The news, however, is filled with violence. Images of ethnic “cleansing” and many armed conflicts in hot spots throughout the world shatter any illusion of peace currently. A hijacking in India and bomb materials seized entering the United States marred millennium celebrations with the specter of terrorism. Gang violence and youth violence send shock waves through the nation. Police brutality is heinous, for example, against minorities in New York City and Chicago. Hate crimes against those of another race or another affectional/sexual orientation than oneself are appalling, for example the gruesome murder of Matthew Sheppard and of at least eight gay men in Texas in less than two years (Bissinger, 1995). Even in so-called polite society, destructive confrontations occur daily both between and within various social, ethnic, government, business, and religious groups. Physical violence invades the sanctity of the home with wife-battering and child abuse. Verbal violence is common as angry individuals conflict with each other. Internal stresses and frustrations rage within most of us too much of the time.

Can the Japanese tea ceremony offer any remedy for such (1) intrapersonal stress and (2) interpersonal conflict and violence? The current Grand Master of the Urasenke

tradition of Tea, Sen Soshitsu XV, has a motto “Peace through sharing a bowl of tea” (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1991a, 81). Is this motto realistic? From both historical and contemporary viewpoints, has the Japanese tea ritual fostered peace within the individual and/or between people? Can the Way of Tea play a role in what psychologists call stress management for the individual and conflict prevention and resolution between individuals or groups? This article proposes that indeed it has and can. It also presents the possibility, however, that stress and conflict can sometimes arise within the practice of tea, as surely it will in any endeavor involving human nature. The sincerity and faithfulness with which one follows the principles of tea seem to make all the difference.

Historically, the tea ritual has its earliest roots in sixth century Chinese Ch’an Buddhism and twelfth century Japanese Zen Buddhism and thus is associated with meditation and a peaceful way of life (Anderson, 1991, 13–32; Hirota, 1995). In fourteenth century Japan tea drinking became, however, paradoxically both a solemn ceremony in temples and also the occasion for extravagant tasting competitions and gambling for nobles and samurai (Anderson, 1991, 26; Sen Soshitsu XV, 1990, 5–6). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it gradually developed into a very refined ritual, perhaps ironically partly in reaction to the stress of the violence of the Onin Civil War (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1990, 5–6) and partly influenced by the warrior's discipline and strict code of etiquette (Hammitzsch, 1980, 33–36). Samurai left their swords in racks outside the tearoom and crawled in through a low, humbling opening (Hammitzsch, 1980, 57). It was supposed to

be a place of tranquility where warlords, merchants, and monks met on equal footing to relish silence, the beauties of a garden, exquisite arts and crafts, and a simple bowl of tea together.

The powerful warlord Hideyoshi, however, had a portable teahouse right on the battlefield (Sadler, 1963, 129)! The tradition of martial arts with its spirit of bushido, the way of the warrior, has used meditative practices like the tea ritual to center oneself and be ready to fight and to die in battle. It may have calmed Hideyoshi to practice tea on the battlefield. The sight of his engaging in this ritual probably inspired his soldiers and unnerved the enemy. Hideyoshi also held military strategy meetings at his tea gatherings at home (Anderson, 1991, 37). Finely crafted tea utensils were sometimes given as “arrow money” a kind of tribute to avoid being attacked (Anderson, 1991, 36). They were also sometimes used to reward military success (Tadachika, 1976). The practice of tea and its highly valued utensils thus apparently played roles in avoiding violence but also in waging and rewarding it.

The mingling of tea, war, and commerce in this period is also illustrated by the wealthy merchants of Sakai, who played an important role in the practice of tea, imported the expensive utensils, and also sold weaponry and other military supplies (Anderson, 1991, 33).

The most famous tea master of history, Sen Rikyu, was the son of one of the wealthy Sakai merchants and became a Zen Buddhist. He practiced the Way of Tea in rustic austerity as a meditative path to spiritual enlightenment (Tanigawa, 1976, 37; Okakura, 1991, 153–154). He also became, however, the tea master for Nobunaga and, after his death, for Hideyoshi, two famous

warlords who each fought to bring Japan under one rule. In contrast to Rikyu's rustic, natural tea-style preference, Hideyoshi wanted elaborate, ostentatious tea ceremonies with gold utensils in a gold tearoom. His military ambition was to dominate all Japan and even invade Korea and China. The conflict over their differences eventually led to Sen Rikyu's house arrest and seppuku, ritual suicide by disembowelment, surrounded by 600 (or 3000 depending on the source one reads) enforcing soldiers (Anderson, 1991, 47; Murai, 1988, 23). Even in the life of this undisputed greatest tea master a mixed picture appears of both tranquility and violence associated with tea. Tea people tend to interpret Rikyu's poems and the stories about him as demonstrating his serenity in the midst of this violence around him.

Turning from the historical to the contemporary practice of tea, is there evidence for its efficacy in stress-management and conflict resolution? Descendent of Sen Rikyu, Grand Master Sen Soshitsu XV was drafted and left home for World War II with a new tea procedure his father had developed for his son's use on the ship with his compatriots in the special attack forces (Anderson, 1991, 236). Perhaps, like Hideyoshi, it gave them some dignity and serenity as they faced death. After Japan's devastating defeat, Sen Soshitsu returned home to find his father, the Grand Master then, cordially serving tea to several of the enemy American soldiers. At that point he realized that peace can begin with a bowl of tea prepared with all the heart (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1991b). His work has now spread the Way of Tea to some 30 countries.

Sen Soshitsu XV says the purpose of the Tea-Way is to realize tranquility in communion with others within the

environment (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1991a). “Tranquility” implies stress management, and “in communion with others” relates to conflict resolution. Although not the focus of this paper, the phrase “within the environment” could be analyzed in relation to ecological violence against the earth and the violence experienced by four-fifths of the world’s people from the vastly unequal distribution of wealth. Does the appreciation of nature, its seasons, its flowers, vegetables, etc. in tea practice foster more protective care for the earth? Does the beauty of the costly tea arts and crafts justify their expense when millions starve? What ethic does the tea practitioner follow with regard to frugality and material acquisitiveness?

Focusing instead on the goal of “tranquility,” psychological and medical research is showing meditation to be an effective stress-management technique (e. g. Fling, Thomas, & Gallaher, 1981; Kabat-Zinn, J., Massion, A. O., Kristeller, J., Peterson, L. G., Fletcher, K. E., Pbert, L., Lenderking, W. R., & Santorelli, S. F., 1992; Murphy, L. R., 1996). The tea ritual is like a slow-moving meditation that has been compared to T’ai Chi Ch’uan (Cohen, 1976). With much practice, the host learns to be one-pointed in focus yet with an awareness of the whole context of tearoom and guests simultaneously. Each moment’s movement and the utensil being handled at that instant flow into awareness and then dissolve into the next moment’s awareness. A “body memory” develops that allows a kind of fluidity and emptiness that can lead to a feeling of oneness with the water, fire, utensil, guest, all. The oneness of guest and host, for example, is hinted in the Zen expression *muhinshu* composed of *mu* (nothingness), *hin* (guest), and *shu* (host). As both are “no-thing,” they are one (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1991a, 40).

The guests, having entered through a lovely garden and sitting quietly in an uncluttered, natural space with the sound of the water’s boiling and the fragrance of incense, may feel a profound serenity. They may follow the flowing movements of the host, while also focusing on each delicacy and utensil that comes to them. Aware of only the present moment, they may experience the emptiness and oneness spoken of in Zen. Ideally the consciousness developed in these simple acts of preparing and drinking tea can generalize to everything that one does (Sen Soshitsu XV, 1990, 4). Considering these effects on host and guests, psychologists might well recommend the practice of tea as a practical stress-management technique, much like meditation. It can have even more appeal to some than does motionless, solitary meditation because of the tea ritual’s movement and direct relatedness with other people, the arts, and nature.

At the same time, preparations for a tea event can be extremely elaborate and complex, requiring many hours and even days of very taxing food preparation, unpacking utensils, readying supplies, putting on kimono, etc. Practitioners can sometimes become rushed and intense as the time grows near and be exhausted afterward. Even then and even for a novice, there may have been those moments of seemingly perfect tranquility, and the tired, contented relief afterward may include something like the sense of accomplishment in creating beauty that a pianist feels after a vigorous concert preceded by hours of disciplined rehearsal. Sitting on the floor for several hours can become extremely painful for the knees and feet. Wearing kimono with several layers of fabric in hot, humid weather can also be distracting to any meditative state.

The Way of Tea thus seems to have the potential to be very stressful as well as stress reducing.

Some have apparently progressed to the point of maintaining equanimity and even light-hearted humor throughout such taxing conditions, however. They are almost unfailingly the most dedicated and advanced tea people. They seem to experience the challenge of the work and discipline as eustress (positive stress) rather than distress. Indeed their tea practice seems to generalize to an equanimity maintained throughout the stressors encountered in the rest of life outside the tea room. Tomoko Sen, late wife of the Grand Master and beloved Okusama of Urasenke students, illustrated this in her lesson about the bashira. The bashira is a central pole in a pagoda that hangs freely from the apex in such a way that it moves in response to an earthquake and then returns to equilibrium, thus giving stability to the edifice. Okusama vividly and beautifully demonstrated such flexibility and centeredness in her own gentle spirit.

Turning now from the issue of peace within oneself and returning to Sen Soshitsu XV's phrase "in communion with others" bring to focus the second issue of this article. Can the Way of Tea contribute to conflict prevention and resolution between people?

The four principles of tea were covered in a previous article (Fling, 1998, 30–31) and paper (Turay, 1999). The first is **harmony**. A host may smooth a conflictual relationship by careful selection of guests to promote renewed harmony. Certain tea exercises that involve spontaneity and flexibility in changing roles provide unifying group experiences in coordination and cooperation with others. These often feel like a kind of harmonious, interwoven dance. Even working in the

mizuya (tea kitchen) ideally is a masterpiece of harmonious efficiency between people.

With regard to the second principle of **respect**, the practices of bowing and turning a utensil's design toward the other person seem more than mere form. Research has shown that one's non-verbal behavior can affect one's feelings and cognitions (Laird, J. D., 1974; Lanzetta, J. T., Cartwright-Smith J., & Kleck, R. E., 1976). In the tea setting, such procedures may actually foster respect and minimize potential for conflict.

Although polite, respectful words and demeanor definitely seem to predominate, words in the tea world do not always sound perfectly harmonious and respectful. Students are sometimes anxious about seemingly harsh correction from a kibishii (strict) sensei (teacher) or sempai (senior student). Later, of course, they may come to value this, knowing they will never forget a sharply corrected point in the procedure. Also teachers are often yasashii, easy-going and even humorous in their corrections, creating a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. The most advanced and dedicated practitioners seem to demonstrate reliably the values of harmony and respect. Perhaps they have been shaped by their years of practice of the Way.

The third principle, **purity**, refers not only to actual and ceremonial purity of the tea setting and utensils but also to purity of the heart and mind. Both host and guest should prepare and participate with purity of intention without desire for gain or favor. Fling (1998) covered steps in the procedure that can be helpful symbolic reminders of this. Surely some tea students, being human, will sometimes maneuver or even overtly bicker over utensils, role, and status (Mori, 1992). Most advanced practitioners seem, however,

consistently to observe the value of a pure heart, of sunao or sincere, humble compliance, cooperating and putting the other before oneself.

The fourth principle is **tranquility** or satori or enlightenment itself. It is not something to focus on or strive for but a natural result of following the first three principles, harmony, respect, and purity. To the extent that one tastes or glimpses even a "mini-enlightenment" experience, more harmony, respect, and purity should accrue, all of which should lead to less anger, conflict, and violence. Sen Rikyu spoke of entering the serenity of nothingness and then returning to the world to behold that everyone and everything, even a tiny blade of grass, share that glorious nothingness as the basis of being. He said that thus we cannot help bowing to each other (Kobori, 1988)!

At the fiftieth anniversary of Urasenke Tankokai (World Views of the Way of Tea, 1991), leaders of twenty-one countries showed interest in the Way of Tea. Sen Soshitsu asked if the little respectful acts in the tea ritual can help transcend national borders, ethnic disputes, and racial discrimination. Sun Ping Hua of Beijing cited an ancient Chinese proverb that mutual trust between people arises not from drinking sake but sharing tea. Edard Shevardnadze of Moscow said that tea is a wonderful tradition, a private sector diplomacy that can help deepen international understanding and bring people of the world closer.

In conclusion, evidence from both historical and contemporary practice suggests that the meditative Tea Way can indeed provide inner tranquility, even in the midst of violence. In addition to this benefit of stress-management within the individual, tea practice can also contribute to the prevention and resolution of

conflict between people. At a recent tea conference, one father shared how sharing tea practice had facilitated his strained relationship with his son.

At the same time, as with any challenging endeavor that requires rigorous discipline and cooperation from fallible human beings, tea can also be the occasion for intrapersonal stress and interpersonal conflict. One can abuse the practice of tea for the motivation of status, for example, accumulating and displaying utensils and kimono for self-glorification rather than aesthetic appreciation and sharing. One can become very anxious about pleasing or impressing a teacher or guest and about hosting gatherings perfectly instead of enjoyably. One can also become competitive and irritable with others.

The Tea Way can be compared to the power of nuclear energy or of religion for good or for ill. Like them, it can be used for peace and healing, or it can be abused in ways that lead to stress, destructive conflict, and even violence. The hurtful potential is not inherent in the religion, nuclear energy, or Tea Way itself, but in the motives and means of fallible human beings. As discussed in this article, the determining factor is the person.

Dedicated tea people who faithfully follow the principles of tea manifest its effectiveness in helping them prevent and manage stress and conflict. Students who persevere become shaped in this direction.

Concluding dogmatically that the tea ritual is a panacea for all human foibles would seem contrary to the principles of tea itself. One "follows" and "practices" the Way of Tea, striving to pursue the principles of harmony, respect, and purity, never claiming to have actually achieved them. As a natural consequence, the fourth principle, inner tranquility grows and one may at least

glimpse enlightenment. As Soto Zen's Dogen taught, the practice itself or "just sitting" is enlightenment (e.g., Okumura, 1990, 74).

One is always a beginner in tea, going from one to ten and beginning at one again. One never claims to achieve perfection with absolute freedom from stress but rather increases in the flexibility to yield, flow, and adapt, thus converting stressors to growth-producing eustress instead of distress.

Likewise, one is not totally free from conflict with others but learns to creatively redirect the energy generated in differences which arise or attacks that come. If one sincerely pursues the four principles of the Way of Tea, one will surely manifest the wisdom of the One and compassion for the Many (Suzuki, 1999) and thus reduce both stress and conflict.

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