

FORMAL TEA MEDITATION

Tea meditation is meditation while drinking tea. Sometimes we spend two hours just drinking one cup of tea and eating a small biscuit. Tea meditation can be held in a temple, but it can also be held at home with the participation of honorable guests of a family. For a tea meditation to be successful, the number of participants should not exceed 16 people. During tea meditation, we feel at ease, peaceful and happy. We dwell perfectly in the present moment with the presence of our beloved ones.

The first users of *Camelia Sinensis* are Zen masters. They realized that this kind of tea made them feel alert and they can maintain their alertness during sitting meditation. Gradually, young leaves of *Camelia Sinensis* were used to make tea. At every Zen monastery, practitioners drink tea. Every novice monk knows how to make tea.

Making tea for the whole Sangha became a ceremony, because the tea master must practice mindfulness during tea making. Japanese tea ceremony originated from Zen. The art of tea preparation during a Tea Ceremony in Japan has advanced to a level of delicacy, but unfortunately, the techniques of making tea remain while the content of tea meditation has lost. Tea masters no longer follow their breathing and are unaware of every bodily moment in accordance with mindfulness practices of the old days.

Our (Plum Village) tea meditation is much more simpler in the techniques, but focuses more on the content of meditation.

How to organise formal tea meditation

I. Preparation:

- Number of participants is no more than 16 people, including: Tea Master, Tea Master attendant, 2 Tea makers, 1 person to make offering to the Buddha, and guests.
- The invitation is simple, zen, indicating the reasons of the tea meditation session, venue and time. The Tea Master signs on the invitation and send it a few days in advance so that invitees can arrange their time. In case the invitees can not attend, they should inform the organising team. (Invitation letters should be sent together with some brief introduction about tea meditation to all first-timers)
- Tea Master should guide the whole tea meditation. Tea Makers, prepare tea, are important to the session. Tea Makers' every moment should be mindful. They follow their breathing and are aware of their bodily moment while making tea. Every moment of the tea makers are observed by the Sangha, so their serenity also affects the serenity of the whole Sangha. We should only take the responsibility of a tea maker after having attended many tea meditation ceremonies and know how to make

tea. From the beginning to the end of the tea meditation ceremony, the tea maker should not stand up. All the tea making tools should be within reach of the tea maker.

- The tea makers prepare trays, tea pots, hot water bottles, tea cups, biscuits (enough for each participant to have 1-2 pieces), leaves to hold the biscuits and a small tray to put the offerings to the Buddha. If there are 16 participants the tea makers should prepare 17 tea cups and 17 biscuits because one cup and one biscuit should be offered on the Altar (we should not use biscuits with plastic wraps to avoid making noise. Should only use biscuits that are dairy free and eggs free).
- Set up the Spiritual Ancestor Altar: The Spiritual Ancestors can be the Buddha or the Founder of the Zen Monastery. On the Altar there is a statue of the spiritual ancestor, a vase of flower, candle and incense holder.
- Tea master and tea makers should know the exact number of guests to prepare enough cushions and mats. Set up cushions and mats in a circle. Mark the seating position of the tea master, tea master attendant, tea makers, attendant to make offering to the Buddha (if necessary). It's possible to arrange a circle following the diagram on the first page.

II. Ceremony:

1. Welcome guests
2. At the time of tea meditation, the tea master and their attendants stand in two rows in front of the door, invite three sounds of the bell to welcome guests, smile and bow to each guest. Guests also bow back.
3. Ceremony
4. At the tea meditation venue, everyone stands next to their cushion, turn towards the Altar for incense offering. After everyone has entered the venue, the tea master attendant carefully lights an incense and gives it to the tea master. The tea master bows with their head slightly down, receives the incense and then hold it above their head to contemplate while their attendant sits at the bell. Three bells are invited before the master offers the incense to the Altar (the master can ask someone else to offer the incense offering chant is needed).
5. After the incense offering, touching the Earth 3 times, the tea master and their attendant return to their seat. The tea master turns to their guests and recites the gatha: "A lotus for you, a Buddha to be". The tea master attendant invites everyone to touch the Earth one time before each other and then sit down. The tea master welcomes their guests with all respect, no more different than respecting their ancestors, and the guests also show their respect back.

“Dear Sangha please sit down” the tea master gestures and says. Everyone sits down and follows their breathing. If every minute of the session is a minute of ease then the session is successful.

- After adjusting their posture, breathes and dwells in serenity, the tea makers starts making tea to offer their Zen ancestors. After the tea is made, the tea maker respectfully holds the tea in a tray above their head, while the attendant stands up, walk mindfully to the tea maker and bow and kneel down to receive the tray and give it to the tea master. The tea master makes offering to the Buddha, while the attendant stands behind. A sound of the bell is invited for everyone to bow down. The tea master and his attendant return to their seat, bow down and sit down together. The role of the attendant in offering tea is very important, because during that time, everyone follows the footstep of the attendant to maintain mindfulness. Therefore, the attendant needs to practice beforehand both in appearance and in content.
- Tea makers gives biscuits and tea
- It's time for the tea makers to pass tray of biscuits. Both tea makers lift the tray at the level of their heart, then pass the tray to the person sitting beside. This person bows to receive their serving, then receive the tray and pass the tray to the tea maker. When the tea maker has received their serving, this person will offer it to the next person. In this way, the tray is passed around in mindfulness.
- After the **third guest** has received the tray of biscuits, the tea makers will start making tea. The empty tray of biscuits will be passed back to the tea makers, then the tray of tea will be passed around (using the same mindful manner). If the tray of biscuits and the tray of tea arrive at the same time, the guest will receive the biscuits first before receiving the tea.
- After every guest has received tea, biscuits and the empty trays have been passed back to the tea makers, the Tea Master will lift the tea cup, and read the gatha for drinking tea. Everyone holds the cup of tea in their two hands.

“This cup is in my two hands

Mindfulness is held perfectly

Body and mind dwell peacefully

Here and now”

- The tea master bows to invite everyone to enjoy tea. (They can also say aloud: “Invite the Sangha to enjoy tea”). Everyone enjoys tea and biscuits in silence.
- Sharing:

- The tea makers on behalf of the tea master start by reminding the Sangha how to signal to get another cup of tea. If a guest would like to have more tea then they can signal by put their hands together like a lotus bud. The tea maker, a mindful person, will recognize and will pass an empty tray to that person. That person will put their tea cup on the tray with two hands, and will pass the tray back to the tea maker. After a few minutes, the guest will receive a hot cup of tea.
- During the tea meditation, the first few minutes are in silence. After that silent moment, the tea master will invite everyone to share. During a formal tea meditation, everyone shares about their happiness and gratitude. The sharing is zen, gentle and poetic. In addition, if anyone has any poem, songs, musical instruments ... that are nourishing for both body and mind, they can offer the Sangha. If there are teenagers participating, we should also invite them to share. Everyone listens and shares in mindfulness.
- End of the tea meditation
- At the end of the session, the tea master signals to the tea makers to pass the empty trays around to collect tea cups.
- At the end of the session, the tea master thanks the Sangha and invites three sounds of the bell. After a sound of a small bell, everyone bows, gently massages their legs for blood circulation. With the next sound of the small bell, everyone stands up behind their cushion, bows to each other, faces the direction of the Altar and bows before leaving.
- The tea master and attendant stand in two lines to say farewell to the guests. Each guest leaves slowly and serenely like when they arrive.

Formal tea meditation should be organised once and more during a retreat. Tea meditation should also celebrate ordination or any events. Tea meditation brings about concentration and peace and happiness like walking meditation and sitting meditation.

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This material was composed based on "Thich Nhat Hanh: Dwelling Peacefully in the Present" and contributions from two workshops on "Formal Tea Meditation" by Thai Plum Village Dharma Teachers Council.

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Some ideas for observing Dharma Sharing

Dear sisters and brothers, we are invited to observe the Dharma Sharings this Summer closely, with an open, attentive, compassionate mind. We know it's not easy to lead an international Dharma Sharing group. There are many challenges—of culture, language and different energies. It is wonderful that a group of people can come together as fellow-human-beings and friends on the spiritual path. Please observe closely, to learn from our elder sisters how they lead Dharma Sharing each week. And don't forget that you can contribute to a successful Dharma sharing with your presence, your deep listening, and your own authentic, inspiring sharings.

Collecting the energy

- **How does the facilitator arrive** at the Dharma Sharing? (Walking mindfully? In silence? How do they use eye contact with the group? How do they connect with the monastic head of family, or to the staff member? Do they harmonize with the existing energy, or do they already begin to direct and change the energy?)
- How do they **collect the energy of the group**? (Changing the position of the chairs? Singing a song? Listening deeply to what everyone is saying? Do they check to see everyone is comfortable and happy (not too much sun or wind, comfortable how they are sitting, checking that everyone can hear, that everyone has translation who needs it...)
- **Notice the moment when the facilitator directs the group to begin the Sharing.** Notice what the facilitator says. Do they greet everyone? Do they ask how they are doing? Do they invite everyone to introduce themselves, or play a game?

Transitioning to start the sharing

- Is there a natural flow from the set-up / settling-down time to the Dharma Sharing introduction? Has the group connected and relaxed yet?
- Do you feel that everyone has arrived in the present moment, or are they still tense (uncomfortable) or distracted? *[Note: remember that for some people the Dharma Sharing is a very scary session]*
- How does the facilitator use body language and eye contact to include the group? What do you notice about their tone of voice? Is it calm or joyful? Gentle or authoritative?
- Do they go directly into a full introduction about Dharma Sharing, or do they go round the circle with another question? (If so, notice what they ask)
- Do they ask how many people are new to Dharma Sharing?
- Which **key points** do they mention to introduce Dharma Sharing?
- What words do they use to introduce **the practice of Deep Listening**?
- Do you feel their introduction could have been done differently? (Could some more things have been added? Could some things have been left out, to make it shorter? As an observer, it is helpful to remember what the facilitator said, or what they forgot to say, and to see if it that an impact on the energy of the dharma sharing...)

Observing the first Dharma Sharing

- Was everyone able to share once? How did the facilitator encourage those who are more shy?
- Were there any difficult silences? Did the facilitator use the bell or a song in the middle of the sharing?
- According to your perception, do you think everyone understood how to practice deep listening? Did they understand how to share from the heart (and not from the head)?
- How did the other monastics (including yourself!) or staff or long-term practitioners contribute to a positive energy & successful session?
- Did the family group feel **connected** to each other as a result of the sharing? Was the energy of **trust** established? Did the group feel more **positive** after the first sharing, or more heavy?
- **Were there any difficulties?** Eg. Did anyone share unskillfully or inappropriately? Did someone address another person directly? How did the facilitator deal with this (observe their body language and eye contact)?
- What words did the facilitator use **to end the session**?

Personal reflection

- How do you feel about the first session? How much did you understand? Did you feel nourished? Did you feel uncomfortable at any point – if so, what caused your uncomfortable feeling?