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"If you are cold, tea will warm you; If you are too heated, it will cool you; If you are depressed, it will cheer you; If you are exhausted, it will calm you." -- William Gladstone

SOMETIMES when we write we think of things that some may consider unimportant or of little consequence. I am reminded that what is often regarded as not vital or ignored is often more crucial than we think.

I sit here writing with a simple cup of Chinese tea sitting on my study table. Surrounded by books, I admit many of which are half read, the solitary cup of tea presents itself to me in pure simplicity. The cup is a simple porcelain china cup. Small, light and showing of a simple blue pattern against a white background. The tea itself is an oolong tea. Specifically it is a Tie Guan Yin Oolong Tea. The tea itself has a floral aroma and is extremely pleasant on the palate. I enjoy many types of tea from Long Jing Green tea all the way through to Lapsang Souchong black tea with its smokey taste and deep warming effect on the drinker especially on those cold winter nights.

Tea drinking is for the enthusiast a way of experiencing great depth of flavour while at the same time enjoying that escape from the clamour and din of the world which so often intrudes upon our lives. Taking the time to savour a cup of tea, and in my case a good Chinese tea provides a kind of respite and concomitant enjoyment which tea drinkers the world over recognise.

One of the beauties of travelling to Malaysia is the chance to visit tea merchants and sit down and taste a diverse range of Chinese teas over a slow afternoon. Often located on a busy street or in a shopping mall, the ubiquitous Chinese tea shop is a good place to escape the rush, the push and pull of the surrounding commercialised environment. Sitting with a knowledgeable tea connoisseur and being introduced to a fine array of teas and their respective attractions is heaven-sent. Often the person who is employed by the tea shop is not simply selling the product but genuinely shares the love and appreciation of tea. The discussions and afternoon spent are fruitful and educative in the proper sense of the term.

On the odd occasion when a friend or acquaintance asks me how I could sit for hours drinking Chinese tea and discussing the fine points of elegant Oolong, the clarity of a good Green tea or the authority of aged Pu-er Cha, I find that my simple response is always, "Have you never tried Chinese tea?"

The answer is usually "Of course" and it is at that point that a realisation occurs to me. The thing is this. My love of Chinese tea also involves the cultivation of taste and the ability to take time. It involves good conversation and observation of cultural nuance and decorum which takes time and discipline to appreciate. Drinking Chinese tea is not just an act of consumption, for me at least; enjoying Chinese tea is more than merely consuming a cup of tea. To enjoy tea is to take time, to ponder and to experience the depth and complexity of taste that Chinese tea can provide.

I have found that my time enjoying Chinese tea with a tea merchant to be some of the most instructive and enlightening time I have spent. I learn about taste and propriety. I observe the
act of caring and generosity. I witness the joys of deep knowledge and experience, the respect that is engendered by being given time to learn and experience the finer points of tea.

In other words, I experience an ethic. I experience being educated and finally, I experience the way the cultivation of taste is also a cultivation of propriety and manners.

For what it is worth, taking time to learn and appreciate Chinese tea has been one path for me to remind myself of the joys of learning and the way that our passions and manners may not always be at odds. Let us hope that the tea merchants in Malaysia continue their tradition of discernment and the cultivation of taste and manners.

Let us hope that our commercial society does not brush aside the space we all need for the true appreciation of things. Taste and manners require time to cultivate. They require examples to emulate. Whenever I drink from my porcelain cup I am reminded of the kindness of the merchants who have served and taught me the joys of Chinese tea. They are examples that commerce, taste, caring and propriety are not necessarily at odds. This memory is educational in the true sense of the term.

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