

「Tea Ceremony: Introduction to Shimada Sonjuku」

On January 15th, the first workshop 2015 of Shimada sonjuku, we planned to start our studying activity by practicing the tea ceremony.

Learning Japanese culture, history and religions is an important part of Sonjuku studies. Tea ceremony is a typical traditional Japanese culture and art. Unlike our parents and grand parents generations, our generation is not quite used to Japanese traditional culture. Many people of course know that tea ceremony is an important Japanese culture but most of them do not have much experience of attending tea ceremonies nor knowing what the tea ceremony is all about.

I was wondering how to fill this gap. I myself experienced somewhat of tea ceremony by getting lessons for a couple of years from a master when I was a graduate student. But much of knowledge and feeling is gone after half a century. After starting Shimada sonjuku, I read again a few books and textbook of tea ceremony to remind myself. The knowledge part can be obtained but the practicing the tea ceremony is not that easy. You have to practice seriously for a certain period before you can serve tea elegantly to your guests. I first wished that I would serve tea to my Sonjuku students at our workshop, but I realize it is not that easy.

While I was thinking as to how to introduce sonjuku students tea ceremony, I happened to have met Ms. Rieko Ishii at a gathering of alumni of my Keio seminar, where She was my student. She told me that she is recently teaching tea ceremony aside from her family business. In fact she has visited various parts of the world to demonstrate tea ceremony with her master as part of introduction of Japanese culture as part of Japan's cultural diplomacy. Listening to my wish, she gladly offered her demonstration of tea ceremony at the sonjuku workshop. This is the reason why we luckily was able to start sonjuku workshop of this year by enjoying tea ceremony.

At the workshop, she showed us how to prepare tea formally for the guests following the simplified form of using tray on the desk. The meaning of this way will be explained later. In fact, she not only showed us how to prepare and serve tea but also served tea to all the students one after another during the workshop. Her ritual of serving tea was quite elegant.

All of us enjoyed it.

After having served tea, she spent half an hour or so explaining history, philosophy and major features of tea ceremony to us. Let me summarize the content of her exposition in what follows.

Tea of the tea ceremony is said to have been brought into Japan from China around 8th century by Japanese monks who visited China to learn Buddhism. The tea ceremony penetrated well among aristocrats of Nara and Heian era as their cherished culture. With the decline of aristocrats prosperity, the tea ceremony itself has gone out of fashion.

In 12th century, when Samurai class took hegemony, tea ceremony was picked up again by Samurai leaders as their sort of status symbol. This is the era when Zen Buddhism gained influence in Japanese society. The priest Eisai of Rinzai-shu of Zen Buddhism preached that when you practice Zen disciplines you have to drink “tea.” Since tea ceremony appreciates the spirit of gratitude, and also emphasize the importance of training your mindset, tea ceremony is considered as an important accompany of Zen-Buddism.

Tea ceremony then not only cherished by samurai class but also gradually penetrated into commoners life and became a popular hobby or at times sophisticated games such as winning prizes by guessing the kind of tea which is served. Tea ceremony also needed appropriate tools and the room prepared for the ceremony, and rather rigorous rituals of ceremony were developed during this period. In 12th and 13th century, when Ashikaga shogunate enjoyed their prosperity centering around their base of East part of Kyoto, tea ceremony was cherished as high status culture for elite class of Samurai, aristocrats and well-do-do merchants.

During this period of prosperity, a high rank priest of Juko Murata developed a new way of expressing the essential nature of tea by the spirit of “Wabi” which means tranquility, sober refinement, subdued taste, simplicity, naturalism, profundity etc. Juko is considered as the originator of “Wabi tea” which is unique to Japan. Kyoto has then been devastated by repeated armed conflicts, people gradually lost the room to enjoy tea ceremony. In contrast, in such city like Sakai which prospered as the port and market of free business merchants emerged as the center of tea

ceremony cherished by wealthy merchants.

Sen no Rikyu or Rikyu Sen, the grand master of tea ceremony, was born as a son of a rich merchant of distribution business in the city of Sakai. He succeeded the spirit of “Wabi tea” which was originated by Juko Murata and developed to the most complete art. For example, the Nigiri-Guchi or a very narrow entrance gate to go into the room of tea, was invented in his period. This entrance is so narrow that Samurai or the warrior cannot sneak into the room carrying swords with him. This means that even the Samurai has to sip the tea at the equal condition with other guests such as merchants or town people. In other words, in the era of Sen no Rikyu, the basic principle of equality among people was established.

The Zen-Buddism has a basic spirit of “harmony” “respect” “purity” and “tranquility.” The solid spirit encompassing these aspects is valued in Zen-Buddism, and masters of tea ceremony of this age began to regard that this is exactly the fundamental spirit of tea ceremony.

This is the most war ridden era in Japan’s history. Conflicts and fights are all around. It was not uncommon that the subordinates attack the bosses, and killing among family and relatives. Life of particularly samurai was full of dangers. The tea ceremony which respects the above mentioned spirits has been viewed as a very special time and space by samurais and commoners of this era.

In this war ridden era, tea ceremony was often held even between warfares. Guests who participate to such ceremonies may anytime lose their lives in the war. The moment when they can enjoy tea ceremony was highly cherished as a precious moment of “Ichi Go Ichi E” which expresses the valuable moment of tea ceremony which can exist only once in a certain period of life. Sen no Rikyu is the grand master who completed “Wabi tea” as the ultimate form of such tea ceremonies. He also is well known for recommending the use of tea tools made in Japan stepping further from cherishing solely the tools made in China.

Tea ceremony is said to be the crystalized essence of Japan’s beauty. It includes, for example, the functional beauty. The functional beauty encompasses all the beauties of tools, rooms, gardens. Another is to appreciate the natural beauty particularly of seasonal changes such as

flowers, gardens, sunlights which are well incorporated in tea ceremonies. Still another is the spirit of preparing everything well to welcome guests such as cleaning the garden, doorways, rooms, burning incense, hanging calligraphy art which gives the tea ceremony a comprehensive beauty.

Let us learn a bit about the tradition of Sen family, which succeeds the invisible inheritance of Sen no Rikyu. Sen no Rikyu terminated his life by “harakiri” or dignified killing of himself by short sword by having been distrusted by Toyotomi, Hideyoshi, the most powerful conqueror of the time. Sen family has been prohibited serving tea ceremony for some time after the death of Sen no Rikyu in the anger of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Interruption continued until the time of his grand-son Sen no Sotan who recovered tea ceremony activities. He had four sons. The eldest son was not admitted by his father as tea master. Three sons left inherited the tradition of the family. The second son named his family Musha Koji Sen family and served the feudal lord Matsudaira, Sanshu of Takamatsu, the third son named Omote Sen family and served Tokugawa family of Kishu, and the forth son named Ura Sen family and served Maeda family in Kaga region.

Related with the Sen family sect, there exists Enshu sect. This was originated by Kobori, Enshu who succeeded the invisible inheritance of Furuta, Oribe who is a relative of Sen family, and served later the Tokugawa Shogun family and prospered up to now.

Tea ceremony needs a variety of tools. To make them, highly skilled craftsmen for at least 10 kinds of crafts are said to be necessary, which are usually referred to as the ten craft professions of Sen family sect. They are, for example, crafting pots to boil water, bamboo crafting to make tea spoons, lacker painter to paint small box to keep powder tea, craftsmanship for making potteries etc.

Incidentally, black “Raku” type of bowl pottery is often cherished in tea ceremony. The black Raku bowl is peculiar in its thickness and black color and it makes a beautiful contrast when it contains fresh green thick tea. In fact this type of bowl is usually used for “thick tea” rather than thin tea. In the tea ceremony using the thick tea, it is a rule to sip the tea by three people in turn while thin tea is sipped only by one person at a time. The thick and black Raku type bowl is designed to be used for “thick tea”

ceremony in order to not the tea to be cooled down during a longer period of three persons taking the tea from the same bowl in turn. This is an example that the beauty has its functional use. Tools used for tea ceremony often seek the beauty of combining the best form for the best functional use.

Ura-Sen house later faced a hardship of unable to serve the feudal lord because the samurai system was abolished in Meiji restoration when all the feudal lords were deprived of their assets. In order to cultivate the potential demand of the new era, Ennosai the 13th generation of Ura-Sen house invented a more simple way of serving the tea using a tray. This is invented because Ennosai attempted that female junior high school of the new era adopt tea ceremony as part of their formal education particularly of manner training for young ladies. With such efforts, the tea ceremony gradually began to be practiced more by females of ordinary households than merchants and Samurais in the feudal era. Nowadays, tea ceremony population consists mostly by females rather than males perhaps thanks to this development in Meiji era.

Gengensai, the 11th generation developed a new ritual of serving the tea on a table. He developed this new form of serving the tea in order to meet the need and cultivate the demand of foreign people who have been increasing in Japan in the process of opening and modernizing Japan after the Meiji restoration.

Houunsai, the 15th generation, went as far as to appeal “peaceful tea” by visiting many countries and peoples in the world. By the way, the names such as Gengen sai or Houunsai are the title names which are granted after a certain amount of training of Zen Buddhism. It is the norm for those who wish to be a grand master to enter the training school of Zen Buddhism temples which are largely concentrated in and around the city of Kyoto.

The tea ceremony, which has survived and developed during the history of at least 400 years since Sen no Rikyu, has now become a highly sophisticated culture built in the Japanese life. The tea ceremony has within itself very important spiritual lessons. The mindset of “Ichi Go Ichi E” has mentioned earlier. In order to master the tea ceremony, it is emphasized that one has to keep in mind importantly the three spiritual elements as “real” “study” and “way to pursue.” “Real” represents the importance to

learn necessary motions and rituals of serving the tea, “Study” implies to important elements and factors in the background and basis of tea ceremony, and “Way” is to train and discipline your minds.

It is also said that keeping the spirits of “protect” “destruct” and “leave” is important. “Protect” means to protect the long and valuable tradition of tea ceremony, “Destruct” implies to destruct knowing fully the traditions in order to overcome, and “Leave” is to create the new tradition. In other words, tea ceremony contains in itself the most important essence of self-innovation which is the most necessary virtue of human kind at any era.

The members of Shimada-sonjuku enjoyed in this workshop of tea ceremony offered by Ms. Rieko Ishii in terms of experiencing sipping the tea correctly and listening to her well organized concise lecture of the history, philosophy and features of tea ceremony.