

「Tea Ceremony Experience of Grand Master's Tea House」

Following the tea ceremony lessons given by Ms. Rieko Ishii at the Shimada sonjuku workshop on January 15, 2015, members of sonjuku visited the house of grand master of tea ceremony, Mr. Akiyama, Sosho in the afternoon of March 2015.

Mr.Akiyama, Sosho is one of the highest ranking masters of Ura Sen School which was initiated by the supreme grand master, Sen no Rikyu, some 400 years ago. The grand masters commonly have one letter "So" at the beginning of their first name of the title. For instance, the current top grand master of Sen School has his title name, Soshitsu.

It was a cloudy day just slight rain started to fall. This gave the whole setting of the tea house of Mr.Akiyama, Sosho a calm and sedate atmosphere. His tea house is built in the area of his residence. His residence is in the midst of calm and good residential area near Yotsuya station. When we arrived at his residence, we were welcomed by a beautiful plum tree which holds full blooming dark pink flowers. This is gave us a special feeling expecting the fairly formal tea ceremony. At the doors we were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Sosho Akiyama.

When all of the sonjuku members who are prepared to attend the tea ceremony of that day, Mr.Akiyama stepped into the room where we were waiting with a formal manner and told us that he would serve us two kinds of tea, one is thick tea and the other is thin tea.

Before he served us the two kinds of tea, he gave us a brief explanation as to what the tea is all about. The two kinds of tea are made of basically the same tea leaves with quality difference. The use of thick tea is for a more formal tea ceremony and the thin one is more casual or informal. When we sip the thick tea, there is a rule that the same cup of the tea is sipped by three guests in turn, whereas the thin tea is sipped by one guest at a time.

While the tea leaves as a raw material for these two kinds of tea are basically the same, but the prices of powdered green tea are different because the quality is different., The tea leaves used to make the powdered green tea used for the thick tea are fostered with much care so that they

have better quality and taste. For example, when the tree leaves sprout, they are covered by straws to somewhat prevent sunshines so that the leaves develop thinly and widely seeking to receive dim sunshine. The powdered green tea for the thick teal costs several times more expensive than powdered green tea for the thin tea.

During the early years of development of tea ceremony in Japan at the time of Sen no Rikyu, tea leaves are picked during the first 10 days of May. Tea leaves are then steamed and kept in a pot after being cut in pieces and grounded into powder by grinder. This new tea is kept for half an year so that green tea alcohol elements will evaporate which carry crude green smell.

Tokugawa shogunate had tea leaves fostered in Uji area near Kyoto, and kept for half a year in the ice room along the Nakasendo road which runs through the central part of the mainland Japan from west to east, and the Shogun starts to drink it around November to enjoy the best taste of the best timing.

The commoners along the road prostrate when the Shogunate tea pot was carried on the road. The powdered green tea used for the thick tea is contained within the pot but the quantity in one pot is only several pieces of paper cylinder of about 20g and half paper cylinder of 10g each. And the 90 % of the inside space of the pot is filled with the powered green tea for thin tea surrounding the small amount of green tea for thick tea in the center.

The formal tea party, or “Chakai,” is the party to invite quests to serve the thick tea. This kind of formal tea party is often associated with full course dinner, and they together are called, “Chaji” or the tea event.

The Chaji is held at various times by the taste, intent, and preference of the host. The tea event held in the winter night is called “Yobanashi” or the night story. The tea event held in this timing uses only candles as a source of light. Chakai or tea party tends to invite many quests. In contrast, Chaji or tea event usually invites only a few to several guests. It usually consists of full course dinner and the service of thick tea and takes around four hours to complete the even. The tea event held in the summer morning is called morning tea event.

More normal timing of serving tea event is around noon time. Guests have to arrive at the tea house at least 10 to 15 minutes before the beginning time of the ceremony. At an appropriate timing guest waiting at the entrance of the house step up to a small space called “Yoritsuki” inside the entrance. Here guests have to prepare wearing to attend the ceremony. The rule is to leave things which are not essentially necessary during the tea ceremony. Wear “hakama” or a long pleated skirt like garment if you want and sit on the stool to wait for other guests to come. When all the guests are ready to participate to the tea ceremony, the host shows up, wash his hands using “Tsukubai” or a stone basin holds some water for people to wash hands and at times sip a little bit of water to ease their thirst, greet to guests briefly, and goes into the tea room. After a moment, guests wash their hands by “Tsukubai” and sneak into the tea room through “Nijiri-guchi” a very small gate where one can proceed through only by bending his body as low as possible. This small gate was designed during the war-ridden period of a few hundreds years ago aiming at making Samurai take off his swords.

In the formal tea event, water is boiled in an old iron pot which is heated by charcoal. Thus, the host proceeds to do this handling charcoals according to legitimate ritual, which is called “sumi temae.” When hot water is prepared, then, “Kaiseki Ryori” or the formal course dinner consisting of one soup and three types of food is served. Three kinds of food dishes are served also in accordance with formal steps: first, “omukou” which is sashimi or raw fish, second, “nimonowan” or boiled fish with small amount of soup, and “yakimono” or baked fish. Food materials are selected from food obtained from sea and mountains.

Also, “sake” is served during the dinner. After having served the guests, the host visits every guest in turn and asks to let him share the opportunity to drink sake there. The host asks to use the same sake cup the guest has been using saying that there are no extra cups. The whole process of the course dinner will be completed by serving a cup of rice filled with hot water.

At the beginning the tea event, prior to starting the rituals in the room, guests are expected to sit on stools outside, which is called “nakadachi” and examine dressing correctly. The event proceeds in two stages. First

half starts from getting into the room and eat “kaiseki ryori” the simple full course dinner to ease the hunger, which is punctuated by small cake served. The second half starts with serving of “koi-cha” the thick tea, another ritual to add charcoals and completed by serving “usu-cha.” The whole process normally takes four hours.

The guests are supposed to appreciate calligraphy or picture hung on the wall of “tokonoma” or an alcove of the room, and also small flower hang on the pillar at the side of alcove. After the inter-mission, the host prepares serving thick tea. When it is ready, host clangs the gong. Then the guest steps to a stone bowl keeping water and wash his hands and sips a little bit of water. Then sneaks into the tea room through the “nijiri-guchi” a very small entrance. When the guests are ready, the thick tea is served. The host then prepares charcoals once again, and serve thin tea. This is the ritual of the whole course.

At this occasion of visiting Mr.Akiyama, Sosho’s tea house, after listening to his introductory lecture, we enjoyed “usu-cha” thin tea and “koi-cha” thick tea. The thick tea was served by Mr.Akiyama himself in a formal traditional narrow tea room in somewhat a formal way, and thin tea was served by his wife in a broader room. This was a very good experience for us.