



The philosophy of the Way of Tea is surmised in four concepts: 'wa', 'kei', 'sei' and 'jaku'.

Steeped in tea culture

WAY OF TEA: The Japanese tea ceremony teaches one discipline and to acquire a fresh perspective on life



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“**M**R AMBASSADOR, do teach these students at the Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT) the tea ceremony,” Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad told me when I went to brief him on MJIIT — a concept that was initiated by himself, and realised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak four years ago.

It was in Tun’s office, on top of the Petronas Twin Towers. Quite thrilled by the superb view of Kuala Lumpur beneath my feet, I was perplexed by Tun’s somewhat strange request. In fact, it is a little bizarre to ask for the Japanese tea ceremony to be taught to students who want to learn technology through a Japanese-style education.

I responded instantaneously: “All right, Tun. I know a very good lady master of the tea ceremony, who teaches at the Japan Club. I will ask her to come to MJIIT and demonstrate to engineering students what the tea ceremony is like. It could be on the occasion of a Japan Week of Art and Culture.”

Tun negated me and said: “No, no, Mr Ambassador. I am not asking you to have these students observe the tea ceremony and taste a bowl of green tea, which a lady master

makes with powdered green tea. What I believe is important is to teach students how to make tea by themselves and understand the spirit and philosophy of the Way of Tea.”

Tun continued: “Ambassador, please make the topic of the tea ceremony compulsory, and make these students of MJIIT understand the Japanese culture and way of thinking, through it.”

I was stunned by Tun, who had asked me with his firm words and gaze through his spectacles.

I replied: “Tun, please let me think about the possibility.”

And my struggle of introducing the teaching of the tea ceremony into the MJIIT curriculum started.

The tea ceremony, or Way of Tea

According to Sen Genshitsu, the 15th-generation descendant of Sen Rikyu, who is the founder and master of the tea ceremony, the Way of Tea is to learn how to discipline oneself and acquire a fresh perspective on life, and it is a means to learn a way of life founded on the relationship one has with nature and with other people.

In fact, Sen Rikyu summarised the philosophy of Way of Tea into four concepts: *wa*, *kei*, *sei* and *jaku*.

WA means harmony, a feeling of oneness with nature and people;

KEI means respect, naturally resulting from a feeling of gratitude;

SEI means purity or cleanliness and orderliness, in both physical and spiritual sense; and,

JAKU means tranquillity, the utter stillness and silence to be attained through constant practice of *wa*, *kei*, and *sei*.

Look East Policy

After all, Tun’s request was perfectly in line with the policy he had advocated more than 30 years ago, when he was prime minister. He often emphasised that the Look East Policy was not only about sending Malaysian students to study technology in Japanese universities, but also about asking students to learn Japanese culture, which includes discipline, punctuality, work ethics, etc.

In other words, the tea ceremony represents an art of tea by which we learn to discipline ourselves and acquire a fresh perspective on life. When you are invited to a tea ceremony, you will appreciate a narrow path that leads to the tea house. Inside, you will enjoy an ikebana flower in a vase, a scroll of Japanese painting on the wall, and intricate utensils of tea making, such as tea whisks, a lacquered tea powder container, a tea spoon and tea-tasting bowls, etc.

And, of course, the Way of Tea includes very strict manners, with discipline and precision. After all, it is the quintessence of Japanese culture, and only Tun would dare ask to make the Way of Tea a compulsory topic for engineering students.

‘Ningen-ryoku’ course at MJIIT

My colleagues at MJIIT were appreciative of Tun’s suggestion, and realised it through what we call the *Ningen-ryoku* course, which literally means teaching how to strengthen human skills and capacity. The goal is to cultivate students with a high level of technological and research capability, and inculcated with entrepreneurial spirit, social needs and working culture and ethics, thereby

contributing to the enhancement of the capacity to be a leader or manager, as well as an effective member of society.

In other words, the course includes the “Tea Ceremony” as a part of “Professional Ethics, Safety and Health”. This makes the course very unique in Malaysia.

We teach the tea ceremony, its spirit and philosophy; appreciation of art through ikebana and painting; and manners with precision of making tea, discipline and respect to others and to nature. For the time being, it is only a 90-minute class by a Malay disciple of the Urasenke School of Tea, and far from sufficient to bring students up to a standard to make tea by themselves, but a good start for them to understand what the Way of Tea is about.

My interpretation of Japanese-style education in technology at MJIIT is an infusion of Japanese culture through the teaching of technological skills and human capacity, which makes a difference from other universities in Malaysia. And I believe MJIIT will become a centre of excellence in Asia, in the near future.

From this view, Tun’s suggestion on the tea ceremony is a strong support for the “Second Wave of Look East Policy” that was launched by Najib, under which MJIIT should become a solid platform to make the Malaysian economy more innovation oriented and more knowledge intensive.

I wish, one day, Dr Mahathir and Najib will be sipping green tea made by students at MJIIT, which has grown into a leading university at Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra in Kuala Lumpur.

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