

A Taste of *Chanoyu*: Tea Service at Urakuen

Visitors to Urakuen can experience a traditional-style tea service at Kō-an. Tea is served in the main reception room, which looks out at a secluded garden of moss and artfully placed stepping stones. The tea service at Urakuen is an abbreviated version of a tea gathering, and certain steps, such as the preparation of the tea, are omitted. The service at Kō-an includes only the receiving and drinking of tea, which is done using the same ritualized gestures of a formal tea gathering.

Each step of the tea service is given below, along with a short explanation.

1. Take your seat.

Guests at tea gatherings typically sit on their feet with their legs folded underneath them (a position called *seiza*). However, it is also acceptable to sit cross-legged or with legs to one side.

2. A staff member will offer you a plate with a traditional sweet.

The sweet will come with a wooden pick (*kuromoji*).

3. With your left hand, lift the plate. Then use the pick in your right hand to cut the sweet into bite-sized pieces before eating it.

The sweet is intended to balance the flavor of the matcha to come; try to finish it before the tea arrives.

4. A staff member will place a bowl of matcha in front you, then bow. Place the fingertips of both hands together on the floor in front of your knees and return the bow.

During a formal tea gathering, you would also bow to your neighboring guest (who has not yet received tea) and apologize for drinking first.

5. Lift the bowl with your right hand, with your thumb against the rim and fingers near the base, then place the bowl in the palm of your left hand.

6. Hold the bowl at waist height and turn it 90 degrees clockwise.

At a formal tea gathering, the host places each bowl so that its “front” (usually the side with the main decorative element) faces the guest. This is a sign of respect. In return,

the guests show humility by not drinking directly from the front side of the bowl.

7. Drink.

This preparation of matcha, called *usucha* (“thin tea”), is made using less tea powder than *koicha* (“thick tea”). *Koicha* is generally served only after a meal at full-length tea gatherings, where multiple bowls of tea are served.

8. Once you have finished, use the index finger and thumb of your right hand to wipe the rim of the bowl where you drank.

Wiping the tea bowl is a symbolic gesture of cleansing. It arose from styles in which participants drink sequentially from the same bowl.

9. Rotate the bowl counterclockwise so that the front faces fully away from you, then place it back on the floor.

Some guests use this time to look closely at the bowl and admire its shape or decoration. Because many of the bowls used in tea gatherings are quite valuable, hold the bowl close to the floor while examining it.

10. After you have finished your tea, a staff member will explain the meaning of the scroll and flower arrangement in the room’s tokonoma alcove.

Each of these decorative elements is specially chosen for the season, and they often convey a mood or message that the host of the tea gathering wishes to share.