

The Great is the Enemy of the Good

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I don't know whether Bruce is intentionally referring to Voltaire's famous phrase, "*Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*," "The best is the enemy of the good" but he often warns students, "Do not let the great be the enemy of the good."

By this he is cautioning against the trap that many fall into of not doing what they are able to do, because they cannot to do it perfectly or at least as well as they would like to be able to do it. In this way the 'great,' which is to say the desire to do something much better than one's capacities presently allow, prevents people from gaining the benefits of the 'good,' which is doing what they can.

At the end of the day it is much better to do something than nothing. It is only by practising at our present level that we will ever attain the level of skill that we desire. The attainment of any skill is a path that must be walked. There are no short cuts and it is impossible to suddenly jump a mile down the road.

This impediment to practice is not new. The *Huainanzi*, the most sophisticated articulation of the philosophy and statecraft of the Han Dynasty, considered this very question over two thousand years ago:

If someone waits for a *Yaoniao* or a *Feitu* [legendary horses] to harness, then in this age they will not drive a chariot; waiting for a *Xi Shi* or a *Mao Qiang* [legendary beautiful women] to be matched with, then to the end of their life they will not have a family.

So, without waiting for the brave and talented of ancient times, people themselves are enough, because what they have they also use.

Indeed, *Qiji* [a legendary horse] could cover a thousand *li* in one day;¹ a tired, old horse needs ten rest stops, but it ten days it will also get there.²

We of course have not heard of *Yaoniao*, *Feitu*, *Xi Shi*, *Mao Qiang* or *Qiji*, but it is easy enough to replace them with modern equivalents, such as the most expensive sports cars for the horses and our favourite actress or actor for the beautiful women: If we waited until we owned the most expensive sports car we would never drive, and if we waited to date the world's top supermodel we would never go on a date.

¹One *li* is a third of a mile.

²*Huainanzi* 11.17.

Qiji, the fastest and strongest horse in ancient China, is a particularly good metaphor in the practice of the internal arts. In our instant, want-everything-yesterday culture many want to cover a great deal of ground at once and, when they find that they are not progressing as quickly as they would like, they give up. This is a great shame, all that any of us needs to do in order to progress along the way is to use what we have. That will be enough. Here the *Huainanzi* is referring directly to the *Laozi*:

Calamity: there is none greater than not knowing what is enough

Error: there is none greater than desiring gain

Thus knowing enough of what is enough is always enough!³

In this context, the error is to desire to accomplish our goals faster than we are able to and then giving up when we cannot do the impossible. This is not to know enough. Such an attitude will guarantee that we fail. That is the calamity. The remedy is simply to do what we can. By using what we have we will get there. This is to know enough.

The good news is that wherever we are, provided that we have adequate instruction, we have everything that we need to progress. What we need is always right in front of us. It is the only part of the path that we can ever tread: "A journey of a thousand *li* begins under foot."⁴ This brings us to a saying from the *Tai Chi Classics*, which is found throughout Chinese philosophy and practice: "Many mistakenly forsake the near in pursuit of what is far away." It is only by doing what is near at hand that we will be able to arrive at our destination.

The internal arts are not fast practices. It is not possible to go on a weekend course and become a master, this is true of any authentic craft or art, but with regular practice the benefit to our lives can be profound.

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³Laozi 44.

⁴Laozi 64.