

Making Use of the Middle

or Goldilocks was a philosopher

There is a short phrase in the Taiji classics that is easily glossed over. If we take the time to look at it a little more closely it reveals surprising richness, depth and relevance to our practice of the internal arts and beyond that to the art of living. It is usually translated as "neither excess nor insufficiency." While such a translation is accurate, it does not tell the whole story. A literal translation of the phrase is "neither go beyond nor do not arrive."

This phrase from the Taiji classics is actually a direct quotation from the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhuxi's explanation of the meaning of *Zhongyong*, the title of one of the most famous Confucian classics. He says: "*Zhōng* is the name of that which is not one sided, does not lean, which neither goes beyond nor does not arrive. *Yōng* is level and constant." This explanation is a direct reference to a passage in the *Zhongyong*.

Zhōng means 'middle', 'centre'. *Yōng*, means 'ordinary', 'use, employ' and 'constant'. A very direct translation would be 'the middle of the ordinary' or 'the constant centre'. Both terms evoke the central place (*zhōng*) of balance in any situation, place or state. What is 'ordinary' (*yōng*) if not the absence of extremes, whatever the circumstance? It is also possible to read this title as *making use of centrality*.

Let us look at the original passage in the *Zhongyong*:

The master said: "The Way is not traveled, I know why: those who are knowledgeable go beyond it; those who are foolish do not come up to it. The Way is not made bright, I know why: those who are worthy go beyond it, those who are unlike (the worthy) do not come up to it. No one does not eat or drink, but few are able to know flavour."

Those who acquire knowledge and the worthy are usually exemplars and paragons in the Confucian tradition, but in the *Zhongyong* Confucius warns that such people fail to attain the way because they go beyond it. Theirs is the mistake of overreaching, of excess. The foolish and those unlike the worthy (usually just translated as 'the unworthy') fall into the opposite error of not coming up to the way. Theirs is the mistake of falling short, of deficiency.

The pursuit of the middle is equally important to the Confucian and Daoist traditions, though the focus of each is somewhat different. Confucians emphasise the dao of man, which to them means the realm of human relationships. Daoists, emphasising the dao of Heaven, make use of centrality on all levels of one's being: the physical, energetic, emotional, the mental, and so on.

One of the most important images of centrality in the Daoist classics is that of drawing a bow:

The dao of Heaven is like drawing a bow.
What is high it draws down,
What is low it lifts,
What has too much it lessens,
What does not have enough it adds to.
The dao of Heaven lessens what has too much while adding to what does not have enough.
The dao of men is not so, it lessens what is not enough by offering more to what has too much.
(Laozi 77)

Here we find ourselves in the realm of knowing what is enough: not too much, not too little, as in chapter 44 of 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! (*Laozi* 44)

Considering these passages, from the heart Chinese philosophy, it becomes clear how true to tradition Bruce is when he refers making use of the middle as finding the, "Goldilocks point:" neither too much nor too little, but just right. This is what he means by the 70% rule. In this regard Bruce often tells the story of the man from Sung, the classic version of which is found in Mencius:

[Gongsun Chou asked Mencius] "May I ask in what you are most developed?"
[Mencius answered], "I understand words, and I am good at cultivating my flood-like qi."
[Gongsun Chou said] "May I ask what you mean by 'flood-like qi'?"
[Mencius answered], "That is difficult to explain. Qi can be developed to great levels of quantity and stability by correctly nourishing it and not damaging it, to the extent that it fills the space between Heaven and Earth. . . . One must work at it, but not rigidly. Do not forget about it, but do not help it to grow either. Do not be like the man from Sung. There was a man from Sung who was worried that his crops were not growing, so he pulled on them. Wearily, he returned home, and said to his family, 'Today I am worn out; I have been helping the crops to grow!' His sons rushed out to look, but the crops had already withered. Those in the world who do not help their crops grow are few indeed. Those who abandon them, thinking it will not help, are those who do not even weed their crops. Those who help them grow are those who pull on their crops. Not only does this not help, but it actually harms them. (*Mencius* 2A.2)

This is a beautiful illustration of finding the Goldilocks point in any endeavour: neither helping our crops grow, nor neglecting them; neither going beyond what is needed nor not coming up to it.

Goldilocks may not set a very good example when it comes to breaking and entering, but she is a great exemplar of the principle of avoiding the extremes of too much and too little.

Making use of the middle is the ultimate principle of balance that we can apply to any aspect of life: from exercising or working in the garden, to finding the balance between work and home. Within Tai Chi, neigong and qigong, finding and maintaining balance is practiced on progressively more subtle levels. The first concern is with physical balance, which is not just about standing on one leg but also includes balancing the left and right sides of the body and the blood and lymph flow throughout the body etc.. How we go about regaining physical balance is governed by the same principle. The next level is energetic balance, followed by emotional and mental balance and so on. At each level of refinement the principle is the same, only it is applied to more of who and what you are.

The seemingly innocuous phrase from the Taiji Classics with which we started, "neither go beyond nor do not arrive," is truly one of the most important subjects in our practice of the internal arts and in life.