

Making Use of the Middle

or Goldilocks was a philosopher

(longer version)

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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. The phrase is: *wú guò bù jí* 無過不及, which we will initially translate as:

Neither *guò* nor *bù jí*.

A standard translation for *guò* 過 is 'excess' and for *bù jí* 不及 is 'insufficiency'. Translating these terms in this way is accurate, but it does not tell the whole story. Any traditionally educated Chinese reader will immediately recognise this phrase as a reference to a passage in the Confucian classic, much loved by the Daoists, the *Zhongyong* 中庸.

Zhongyong is often translated as *The Doctrine of the Mean*.¹ *Zhōng* means 'middle,' 'centre.' The Chinese name for China is *zhōngguó*, 'Middle Kingdom.' *Yōng*, means 'ordinary' as well as '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.' The phrase *zhōngyōng* first appears in the *Analects* where it seems to follow this last meaning: "Becoming virtuous by making use of centrality (*zhōngyōng*), that is attainment!"²

Our phrase from the *Taiji Classics* is actually a direct quotation from the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhuxi's explanation of the meaning of *zhōngyōng*. He says:

Zhōng is the name of that which is not one sided, does not lean (*bù piān bù yǐ*), which neither *guò* nor *bù jí*. *Yōng* is level and constant.³

1 Following Legge's 1861 translation. Later in 1885 he opted for *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony*, for the "Sacred Books of the East" series, but returned to *Doctrine of the Mean* for the second revised edition of "The Chinese Classics" series of 1893.

2 *Analects* 6.29 子曰:「中庸之為德也,其至矣乎!」

3 *Zhong Yong Zhang Ju* 1 中者,不偏不倚、無過不及之名。庸,平常也。The phrase *bù piān bù yǐ* also made its way into the *Taiji Classics*. Swaim translates it as: "No leaning, no inclining." Oddly, the two phrases of this sentence do not appear together in the *Taiji Classics*.

Let's look more closely at these terms before turning to the *Zhongyong*. *Gùo* 過 means 'to pass by, to go beyond,' *jí* 及 means 'to arrive at, to come to, to reach, to attain.' *Bù jí* 不及, then, means 'not reach.' Our phrase from the *Taiji Classics* now reads,

Neither go beyond nor do not arrive.

The *Zhongyong*, can fill out its meaning for us:

The master said: "The Way (*dào*) is not traveled (*xíng*), I know why: those who are knowledgeable go beyond it (*gùo*); those who are foolish do not come up to it (*bù jí*). The Way is not made bright (*míng*), I know why: those who are worthy go beyond it (*gùo*), those who are unlike (the worthy) do not come up to it (*bù jí*). No one does not eat or drink, but few are able to know flavour."⁴

The dominant metaphors of this passage are of travelling along *xíng* 行, and illuminating (making bright and clear) *míng* 明, the way *dào* 道. The word translated as 'attainment' in *Analects* 6.29 above, *zhì* 至 'arrive,' is the same word that *Zhuangzi* uses for one who has attained the Dao: literally, "one who has arrived." Arriving somewhere necessarily involves neither going beyond it nor failing to get there. The language of going beyond, not coming up to and arriving in the middle is intimately bound up with the fundamental metaphor of Chinese philosophy and practice: that of the way.

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.

If we are in any doubt about this reading of the *Zhongyong*, there is a passage in the *Analects* where Confucius makes it absolutely clear that *gùo* and *bù jí* equally miss the mark:

Zigong asked, "Who is more worthy, Zizhang or Zixia?"

The Master replied, "Zizhang *gùo* (goes beyond it), Zixia *bù jí* (does not come up to it)"

(Zigong asked,) "So then is Zizhang better?"

The Master replied, "*Gùo* (going beyond) is the same as *bù jí* (not coming up to)."⁵

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,

4 *Zhongyong* 4 子曰:「道之不行也,我知之矣:知者過之;愚者不及也。道之不明也,我知之矣:賢者過之;不肖者不及也。人莫不飲食也。鮮能知味也。」

5 *Analects* 11.16 子貢問:「師與商孰賢?」子曰:「師也過,商也不及。」曰:「然則師愈與?」子曰:「過猶不及。」

which to them means the realm of human relationships. They employ the mean within the *li* 禮, a term usually translated as 'rites,' but which includes what we would recognise as etiquette. Greeting your friends and how one behaves in public are equally part of the Confucian rites.

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. Our passage in the *Taiji Classics* is primarily concerned with the application of not going too far and not falling short physically, energetically and martially. It is unlikely that it is being used in reference to the rites, despite the phrase having been borrowed from one of the greatest of the Confucian masters of the Song dynasty renaissance.

In the Daoist classics, one of the most important images of tending towards and attending to the middle 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.⁶

Making use of the middle, then, is directly related to the art of knowing what is enough:

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!⁷

Considering these passages from the heart Chinese philosophy, it becomes clear how true to tradition Master Bruce Frantzis is when he refers to 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 the writings of *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

⁶ Laozi 77 天之道其猶張弓與。高者抑之、下者舉之。有餘者損之、不足者補之。天之道損有餘而補不足。人之道則不然損不足以奉有餘。

⁷ Laozi 46 禍莫大於不知足、咎莫大於欲得。故知足之足常足矣。For an application of this principle see my article, *The Great is the Enemy of the Good*, <http://www.taichi.uk.com/The%20Great%20is%20the%20Enemy%20of%20the%20Good.pdf>.

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.⁸

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, the top and bottom halves 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 we 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.

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⁸ Mencius 2A.2 「敢問夫子惡乎長？」曰：「我知言，我善養吾浩然之氣。」「敢問何謂浩然之氣？」曰：「難言也。其為氣也，至大至剛。以直養而無害，則塞于天地之間。其為氣也，配義與道；無是，餒矣。是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。行有不慊於心，則餒矣。我故曰：「告子未嘗知義，」以其外之也。必有事焉而勿正。心勿忘，勿助長也。無若宋人然。宋人有閔其苗之不長而揠之者；芒芒然歸，謂其人曰：「今日病矣，予助苗長矣。」其子趨而往視之，苗則槁矣。天下之不助苗長者寡矣。以為無益而舍之者，不耘苗者也。助之長者，揠苗者也。非徒無益，而又害之。」