

Do Not Let the Great be the Enemy of the Good

Dr Matthew Brewer

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.

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 to harness a *Yaoniao* or a *Feitu* [legendary horses], then in this age they will not drive a chariot; waiting to be matched with a *Xi Shi* or a *Mao Qiang* [legendary beautiful women], 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* [over three hundred miles] in one day; a tired, old nag needs ten rest stops, but it ten days it will also get there.¹

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 a Koenigsegg CCXR Trevita (I just looked it up) we would never drive a car, and if we waited to date Gisele Bündchen or Dwayne Johnson (also just looked up) we would remain single.

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. In order to progress, all that any of us needs to do is to use what we have. That will be enough. This brings us, as always, to *Laozi*:

Calamity: none is greater than not knowing what is enough

Error: none is greater than desiring gain

Knowing enough of enough is always enough!²

In this context, the error is to desire to accomplish our goals faster than we are able to and then to give 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. It is much better to do something than

¹ *Huainanzi* 11.17.

² *Laozi* 46.

nothing. And 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 like climbing a ladder: there are no short cuts. It is impossible to miss out rungs. The good news is that, whatever rung of the ladder we are on, provided that we have adequate instruction, we have enough to make progress. What we need is always right in front of us: the next rung. It is the only step that we can actually take. This view is encapsulated in 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 get anywhere.

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. One of the keys to success is not to let the great be the enemy of the good.

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