

# Discretion: not getting stuck

## 權

Dr Matthew Brewer

Even though *Mengzi*, or Mencius, is known as the second sage of the Confucian tradition, after Confucius himself, there are aspects of his thought that are highly regarded by Daoists. For instance, Bruce regularly tells the story of 'The Man From Song' from the *Mencius*,<sup>1</sup> which he claims as Daoist.

Another Mencian passage of direct relevance to Daoist practice concerns centrality, or the mean, which Bruce calls the 70% rule; a principle whose importance Daoist and Confucians have always agreed on, if not necessarily its application. The passage is:

Zimo held onto the middle. Holding onto the middle approaches it. [But] holding onto the middle without discretion, is just like holding onto one [thing]. Those who hold onto one are loathed because they steal from the Dao: [they] hold up one and neglect a hundred.<sup>2</sup>

The word Mencius uses here that I have translated as 'hold onto' is *zhí* 執. It means: 'to hold, seize, take, grab, grasp, snatch'. Generally, though not always, it is a kind of holding that has within it a degree of tension or tightness. The holding in this passage has this quality: holding onto even the middle, the balance point, too tightly, without allowing for the necessary play that balance entails, is as fixed as the polarisation of holding rigidly to an extreme position.

*Laozi* 64 uses *zhí* in the same way, and makes a similar, but more general, point about such holding on.

One who grasps (執) it loses it.  
Thus the sage ...  
Does not grasp and thus does not lose.<sup>3</sup>

The 'it' referred to here can be anything. It certainly applies to maintaining centrality.

The discretion that is required to truly practise the mean is *quán* 權. *Quán* originally meant: 'counterpoise', a counterweight used on a set of scales. From there its meaning was extended to 'weigh, evaluate', 'to assess, and consider specific circumstances', thence to 'balance of power, to carry weight; authority', and then 'to be adaptive, responsive to circumstances'. For instance *quányí* 權宜 is the Chinese Buddhist translation of the Sanskrit *upāya* - 'skilful means': teaching according to the needs and capacities of the student.

The dominant image of *quán* is about finding the balance, centrality, through adjustment. Chen Chun (1159-1223) explains it in this way:

The word *quán*, then, simply takes its meaning from a balance weight. A balance (determines) the weight of things, it can weigh the light and the heavy in order to reach equilibrium. That is why it is called *quán*. To weigh means to change. In weighing (you) have two amounts that are not the same weight, then you adjust (the scale) in response to the object in order to reach equilibrium. This is also like people using *quán* to measure and consider events and things in order to reach the mean.<sup>4</sup>

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1 *Mengzi* 2A.2, see 'Making Use of the Middle', <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Making-Use-of-the-Middle.pdf>

2 *Mengzi* 7A.26.

3 See 'Study not studying', <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Study-not-Studying.pdf>.

4 My translation from: Chen, Chun's *Bei Xi Zhi Yi*, the influential Neo-Confucian philosophical lexicon. For the full English translation see: Chan, Wing-tsit, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

The key sentence here is, 'to weigh means to change'. To find the balance one must move the weight, adjust the pressure, in order to find the centre. This is 'tailoring change'.<sup>5</sup>

The word I've translated above as 'equilibrium' is píng 平, which means 'flat, level, even' and by extension 'fair, just, impartial; calm, peaceful, quiet'. Its range of meaning includes physical, emotional, moral and spiritual forms of balance. The character itself is thought to originally have depicted a balance.<sup>6</sup> Bruce often says that clarity and compassion are not possible without balance.

As part of the spiritual aspect of the Wu Style of Taiji that he learned from Daoist sage Liu Hongjie, Bruce teaches the practice of relaxing the eyes and opening up the peripheral vision in order to develop internal balance. To develop a balanced view, on any and all levels, we need a sense of the whole, with 'no hollows or protuberances', to quote the *Taiji Classics*. If, when doing our form, we are too focussed in front of ourselves, we will not see what is above, below or to either side, near and far. Our view will be partial. This habit can lead to the mind becoming fixed and fixated.

If we practise seeing everything around us without grabbing anything with our minds or our eyes, as Mencius would say, if we look without holding up one thing and neglecting a hundred, then we will develop the mental habit of not holding onto things.

This taking in everything equally, without grabbing anything, is part of what the *Zhuangzi* calls 'equalising things', which happens to be the title of the second chapter of the book. This is the quality of equality, or non-attachment, where no part is more important than any other: both hands are the same, both feet; right is no more important than left. Just seeing everything that is there, every yin-yang, without liking or disliking, and without ignoring, anything can help us to not get stuck on anything. When we get stuck, even if it's in the middle, we lose balance. To lose balance is to be without equilibrium, that sense of internal peace, which is essential to nurturing life.<sup>7</sup>

We start this process, as always, with the body. In the kick section of the Taiji form, for instance, we let the eyes see both hands and the kicking foot, rather than just looking at the front hand. Once that way of looking has become habitual, and stable throughout the form, it can be applied emotionally and mentally, by not focussing, say, on what we like and dislike. 'This and not that' is polarising. By being able to see the whole situation: at work, in relationships, both sides of an argument, etc., we can move with it as best we can. As Bruce says, 'it is what you don't see that hits you'.

Taiji and neigong are, fundamentally, reality practices. Learning to see things as they are is the foundation of balance, clarity and compassion. The trick is not to get stuck in the partial view, not to steal from the Dao. As the *Huainanzi* puts it:

The extent of Heaven and Earth is such that climbing a hill cannot add to it, and squatting low cannot shorten it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See 'Tailoring Change', <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Tailoring-Change.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Karlgren, in his *Analytic Dictionary* (p.227), says that, 'the seal (script character 平) was a picture of a kind of balance'. <https://wenlin.co/wow/Zi:平> says: Older graphs associated with 平 are connected with 秤/称/稱, thought to depict a kind of 'steelyard scale/balance'.

<sup>7</sup> See 'Nurturing Life', <http://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Nurturing-Life.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *Huainanzi*, chapter 1.