

The Principle of Well-Timed Action

“Do not oppose a great force. Retreat until it weakens, then advance with resolution”



Note that this **Principle** does not recommend that we retreat when faced with the little inconveniences or problems we run into every day. We should only retreat, the Principle explains, when facing a force that is too strong, one that will surely overwhelm us if we confront it. Retreating before little difficulties weakens people, it makes them timid and afraid. Not retreating before great forces, in contrast, inclines people toward all kinds of failures and accidents.

The problem appears when you do not know ahead of time which has more strength, you or the difficulty. This leads people to try little “tests,” to try small confrontations with the difficulty which don’t

completely commit them. This leaves room to change their position if it turns out to be unsustainable. In earlier times people used to speak of “prudence,” and this is very close to the idea we are explaining.

There is also another key point: When should we advance? When has the difficulty lost its strength, or when have we ourselves gained enough strength to advance? Here we can use the same idea of trying little “tests” every so often to check, without committing ourselves completely.

When we do find that the balance of strength is in our favor and the inconvenience has weakened, then this is the time we should advance with everything. To hold back reserves in this situation will endanger our success, because we are not advancing with all the energy we have available.

Here is a legend that illustrates this Principle:

Once there was a poor aged fisherman who had three sons. He had the habit of casting his nets into the water only four times a day. One day among many, after dragging the river twice in vain, he felt a great joy when he noticed that, the third time, the net weighed a great deal, so much so that he could hardly pull it in.

But his disappointment had no limit when he saw that his catch consisted of a dead ass which some thoughtless neighbor had thrown in the water. He lamented his bad luck in a loud voice, and as prepared to cast the net for a fourth time, he said "The goodness of Allah is infinite. Who knows, this time I may have more luck!"

When he pulled in the net, he noticed for a second time that it weighed very much, and opening it, he found a huge cup sealed with a metal plate. He removed this and emptied the cup which was full of mud. He looked all around him and was thinking of taking it home to sell it to some smelter, when a column of smoke began to rise from the cup. The smoke grew and thickened until it attained the form of a genie of gigantic proportions. His forehead was as high as a cupola. His hands as big as mountain steppes, his mouth as black as a cavern, his eyes as brilliant as torches, and his legs as tall as trees.

At the sight of the monster, the fisherman, trembling with fear, tried to flee, but its voice, imposing as thunder, left him unable to move.

"There is no other god but Allah, and Solomon is the prophet of Allah!" Exclaimed the genie,

And immediately added, "And you, oh great Solomon, Prophet of Allah, command me. I am at your disposal, and I will obey you immediately."

"Oh powerful genie!" replied the fisherman. "What are you saying? You are perhaps unaware that Solomon has been dead for more than one thousand eight hundred years? Are you unaware perhaps that Mohammed came, the prophet of Allah? Are you trying to make fun of me or are you crazy?"

"What! Me crazy? By Allah I swear to you that if you offend me again, I will have to give you death!"

"Would you be capable of doing it, oh genie? After I freed you from the prison that you were in?"

"Hear my story, fisherman," said the genie, "And you will understand that my threat is not in vain."

"You should know that I am a rebellious genie. My name is Shar; all of my species gave obedience to Solomon, except me. I escaped so as not to submit myself to him. But a vizier sent a persecutor who imprisoned me and led me enchained to his presence. When I was before him, he asked me to accept his religion. Because I refused, he had me placed in that cup you found me in. He sealed it with his seal, and orders it thrown into the sea. Inside my narrow prison I promised, during the first century, to make immortal the man who would liberate me. But nobody liberated me. During the second century I thought of making my benefactor master of the richest treasures. And nobody came. In the third century I promised that he who would liberate me would have my power, my strength, and my wisdom; but this too was in vain. So, giving free vent to my anger, I swore that I would kill the man who would give me back my liberty. That man is you, and no one can free you from my vengeance."

"But if you kill me, oh genie," replied the fisherman, "You will commit an injustice for which Allah will never pardon you, because you repay with a crime the good I did in freeing you. Besides, consider that I am married and have three sons who cannot even take care of themselves."

Nothing seemed to soften the giant, whose immense visage grew more and more ferocious. The fisherman knew that his fate depended on his cleverness, so he devised a strategy which he held on to as a shipwrecked man clings to a plank that passes on the crest of a wave.

“Have you really decided to give me death?” asked the fisherman.

“Of course,” responded the monster.

“Well then, before you commit that injustice, I would like you to relieve me of a doubt that I have.”

“Speak quickly since we are losing much time.”

“You say you were inside that cup; but that is not true. How could you fit in it if one of my hands can scarcely enter it? Only seeing it will I believe it.

“Ah! That means you do not have confidence in me, eh? Well then, after this I will kill you with even more delight, incredulous and unbelieving fisherman.”

The response of the fisherman was to quickly replace the cover on the cup. At first, the genie, seeing him imprisoned anew, screamed and threatened; then he pleaded. But the fisherman paid no attention to his pleas and threats. He took the cup and feigned that he would throw it into the water. In this way, a new oath was wrung from the genie which he would be forced to fulfill after recovering his liberty. Thus the fisherman could benefit from it for himself and for others. But this is part of another story.