



A Single Step

*A journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step.*

Lao Tzu

ONE DAY BUDDHA EMBARKED on a long journey with an anxious and impatient disciple named Ananda.

At this stage in his life, Buddha was getting quite old, and Ananda was even older. Late in the day, growing tired, they were hoping to reach shelter before sunset, to avoid having to spend the night in the cold forest.

Passing by a farmer working in his field, Ananda inquired about the distance to the next town. “Not very far,” replied the farmer. Two miles at most. You will surely reach it by sunset!” Buddha and the old man both smiled, before they moved on.

A few miles further, they encountered an old woman collecting wood, and Ananda asked, “How far is it to the next village?”

The old woman replied, “Not far, about two more miles. You will easily reach it!”—and once again, Buddha and the woman smiled.

After another few miles, they asked a third villager the same question, from which came the same reply and the same smiles.

This caused the weary Ananda to drop his bag in frustration and exclaim, “What is this ‘Just two more miles?...Two more miles!’—It seems go me that we are never going to cross these ‘two miles!’...And why do you and the villagers both smile?”

They sat down together while Buddha calmly explained that he was familiar with this region, and the people who lived there were a gentle and patient sort, always seeking to uplift and encourage others.

“If from the start you tell travelers ‘15 miles,’ they will stop right then and there. But ‘two miles’ and ‘two miles’ at a time soon will become two hundred miles!”

The well-known saying of “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (from Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*) emphasizes that even the most ambitious goals one can achieve in life are ultimately the result of gradual, consistent effort, and thus are perhaps best approached by breaking them down into smaller, manageable steps.

This proverb is reflected in the broader principles of Taoism, in which one seeks a harmonious existence with Life and Nature, learning to flow with the natural course of things rather than forcing outcomes or succumbing to difficulty or frustration.

Buddhism resonates with a similar idea: that the path to enlightenment is not a sudden leap, but rather a gradual, resolute process of learning, practice, and especially, examination of the nature of the self.

In order to avoid being overwhelmed by the overall distance of the spiritual journey — like the impatient Ananda of the story — individuals are encouraged to approach challenges and goals with patience and persistence, focusing on one step at a time.

The story also points out the importance of the journey itself, not just the destination, suggesting that the value lies in maintaining consistent effort in overcoming obstacles and learning to enjoy the process: “A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent upon arriving.” (*Tao Te Ching*, Verse 27)

Buddhism is a philosophy highly in tune with human psychology, which has changed little since the time of its legendary founder. The Buddha understood well the various psychological barriers that keep us stuck in one place, and taught various ways to overcome fear, anxiety, and procrastination.

Most of all, he knew that once we take that initial first step toward our goal, a significant mental shift often takes place.

Beginning breaks the inertia, instilling a sense of accomplishment and providing the self-confidence and motivation to continue. With each successive step a little bit easier than the previous ones, we make gradual but consistent progress — until, almost before we know it, a thousand miles have passed.

As pointed out by poet and translator Stephen Mitchell, there is, in fact, a still deeper meaning hidden in the saying. But in order to best understand it, it may help to return to the original source.

The quotation is from Chapter 64 of the *Tao Te Ching*, and reads 千里之行始于足下, which translates literally as *thousand li—journey—begins—underfoot*, or “A 300 mile journey begins where one stands.” (A li is equal to about 0.3 mile, roughly the width of a typical Chinese village.)

This interpretation moves the emphasis away from our culture’s obsessive focus on action and doing, and more toward *non-action* and *being*. It suggests that before we get too caught up in where we are going, it may be a good idea to ‘ground’ ourselves, and to know where we are coming from.

The saying can also refer to the steps one has already taken: for example, one may feel that they took a wrong turn somewhere long ago, and feel lost in life and unable to find one’s way home. But rather than looking back and indulging in feelings of remorse or regret, one can step forward, gently bringing oneself back to the present and treating each moment as the new beginning that it truly is.

In reality, however far along you are in your spiritual or life’s journey, in any given moment you are taking just *one* single step.

And while you can’t go back and change the beginning, you *can* change the ending — one small step at a time. Starting from right here: the ground beneath your feet. ■