
CHAPTER 3

The First Five Steps of Personal Cultivation

The Confucian Eight Steps are embedded in a remarkably short, one-page classic, the *Great Learning*. In the 1100s CE this ancient text was singled out from among the ritual texts compiled during the Han dynasty as the cardinal work with which to begin one's adult education in Confucian ethics. The brief paragraphs of the *Great Learning* are a framework on which students can flesh out the moral path to humanness. Anyone, not just eminent scholars or chosen disciples, can enter the gateway to sagehood by studying and applying to their lives the steps in this classic. The most prominent Confucians in China, as well as in Chosŏn-era Korea (1392–1910 CE) and Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868 CE), understood and promoted the central importance of the *Great Learning* in the process of self-cultivation.

The middle of the brief text contains the Eight Steps that make up the core of self-cultivation and that make the connection between individual self-cultivation and civil conduct in the social and political order. During the 800s Confucians in China perceived this important insight in the text, and the bridge linking private internal growth with public social order became crucial in Neo-Confucian thought in the eleventh century. The complete text of the *Great Learning* can be broken into discrete paragraphs as follows, with paragraphs four and five containing the Eight Steps.¹

One remarkable feature of this work is the fact that so many later Confucians felt it could connect any historical age to the lost or hidden insights of the ancient Confucian classics. By following the leading Neo-Confucian interpretations of the personal phase of the Eight Steps, this chapter will explore how those steps might apply to later periods, including the present. The explanations of how each step works are from Song-period Neo-Confucians.

The *Great Learning*

1. The way of the *Great Learning* lies in clearly manifesting luminous virtue, renewing the people, and resting in the utmost good.
2. Knowing where to rest, there is stability; with stability, one can have composure; with composure one can be at peace; at peace one can reflect, and with reflection one can get there.
3. Things have their roots and branches. Affairs have a beginning and an end. Knowing what comes before and what comes after is close to the Way.
4. The ancients, wishing clearly to manifest luminous virtue to all-under-Heaven, first put in order their own states. Wishing to govern their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their own persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their minds-and-hearts [*xin*]. Wishing to rectify their minds-and-hearts, they first made their intentions sincere. Wishing to make their intentions sincere, they first extended their knowing. The extension of knowing lies in recognizing [investigating] things and affairs.
5. Things being recognized, knowing can be extended; knowing being extended, the intentions can be made sincere; the intentions being made sincere, the mind-and-heart can be rectified; the mind-and-heart rectified, the person can be cultivated; with the person cultivated, the family can be regulated; the family regulated, the state can be governed; the state governed, all-under-Heaven can be at peace.
6. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, they all as one take cultivating the person to be the root.
7. How could it be that the root be disturbed and yet have the branch remain undisturbed? Never should the important be treated as trivial; never should the trivial be treated as important.

Neo-Confucian students were taught that in ancient times, when the sage-kings no longer ruled the earliest states, both popular custom and education deteriorated. Zhu Xi reconstructed what happened next in his preface to the *Great Learning* in 1189.

At that time the sage Confucius appeared, but being unable to attain the position of ruler-teacher by which to carry out government and education, he could do no more than recite the ways of the sage kings and pass them along, in order to make them known to later generations. . . . There was, however, this piece, the *Great Learning*, which followed up what had been accomplished in elementary learning with a view to setting forth the lucid teaching methods of the higher learning. Thus for outward emulation there would be a model great enough to serve as the highest standard of perfection, and for inner cultivation something detailed enough to spell out in full its sequence and contents.²

Confucius was an extremely perceptive observer of human nature. He assumed, for example, that both within and beyond the social unit of the family, “making good on your word and doing your utmost in relationships” helped build the moral values of each person. As this mindset is described in the *Analects*, “The Master said, ‘I am not sure that anyone who does not make good on their word is viable as a person. If a large carriage does not have the pin for its yoke, or a small carriage does not have the pin for its crossbar, how can you drive them anywhere?’” (2.22). Self-cultivation builds humaneness by being trustworthy in what one says and in practicing thoughtfulness about the interests of others, which means internalizing responsibility for the effects of one’s behavior on others.

When relationships are conducted by people who have cultivated themselves, those relationships become the medium for the extension and development of the humaneness of each person. One’s capacity to be humane increases like the rings of a tree as one repeatedly conducts relationships with deep respect or reverence. The *Reflections on Things at Hand* anthology suggests that a couple of years of living with a calm, self-cultivated mind will naturally foster one’s upright behavior, so one’s mind-and-heart will be “rectified” (*Reflections* IV.67) — that is, become intentionally caring and unbiased. The work of increasing hu-

maneness will ideally reach a point of internalized humaneness identifying with one's innate character. Confucius himself appears not only to have reached this advanced moral state of self-cultivation, but also become one with it at the age of seventy. He stated that at that point he could "follow the desires of my mind-and-heart without overstepping [right]" (Watson, *Analects* 2.4).

The Eight-Step program is a straightforward means to show that self-cultivation can connect to the promise of community harmony and even peace among communities or among nations. Because self-cultivation is lifelong, these steps define not a political structure, but a practice to be socialized into the ruled and rulers alike. The Eight Steps are as follows.

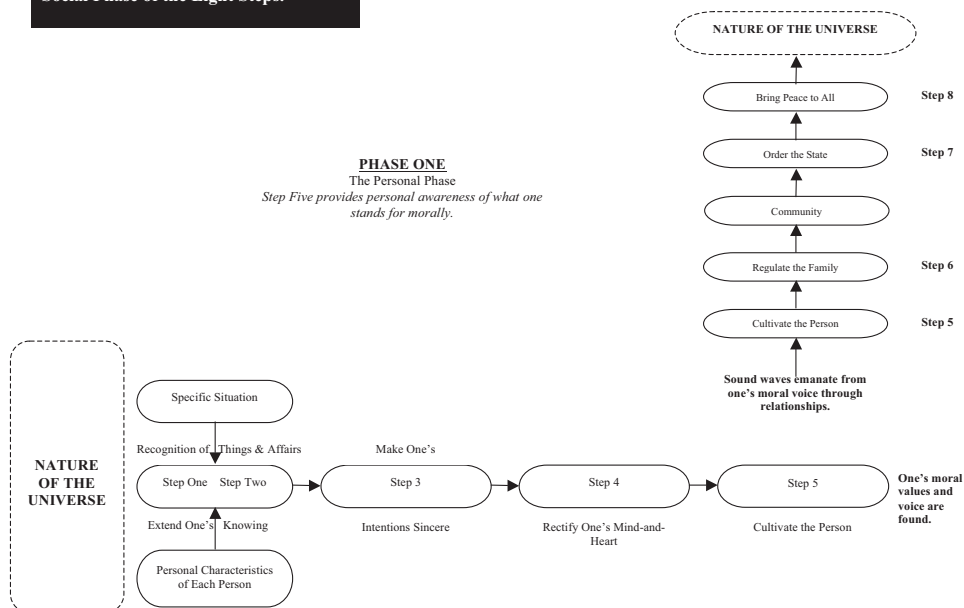
1. Recognize (or Investigate) Things and Affairs
2. Extend One's Knowing
3. Make One's Intentions Sincere
4. Rectify One's Mind
5. Cultivate the Person
6. Regulate the Family
7. Order the State
8. Bring Peace to All

Their objective, as understood by Zhu Xi, was a program for self-cultivation that would allow each person to understand and access the inherent goodness within that person. The diagram below schematizes the two phases of the Eight-Step program. I constructed the diagram to assist the reader in visualizing the connections within the Eight-Step sequence; it does not exist in any Confucian writings.

Step One: Recognize (Investigate) Things and Affairs
(Ge Wu), and *Step Two: Extend One's Knowing* (Zhi Zhi)

The first of the Eight Steps, as Zhu Xi conceived it, is to seek to understand broadly why both natural and moral principles work the way they do. Scholars of the Learning of the Way felt there were insights that could be discovered in the moral realm just as principles could explain why a blade of grass grows. The most perceptive classics on ethics can reveal such insights to the reader who is looking for them. The Four Books were extracted by Zhu Xi to combine with the existing canon of classics in order to facilitate greater access to humaneness,

Diagram of the Personal Phase and the Social Phase of the Eight Steps.



rightness, ritual, and wisdom. These principles in one's subjective experience become manifest through human interaction.

The crucial first step is more an intellectual exercise than a spiritual practice. Cheng Yi's excerpts in *Reflections* note, "It is its [a clear mirror's] normal nature to reflect all things. . . . It is difficult not to have it reflect them. Similarly, the human mind-and-heart cannot but interact with the myriad things, and it is difficult not to have it engaged in thinking" (IV.48). Zhu Xi later elaborated on a similar point about principles.

In daily affairs, at all times and in all places, keep the mind-and-heart alert and do not let it wander. In this regard always observe principles, discuss what you seek and thoughtfully ponder it, deeply immerse yourself in it and go over and over it, and then you will be close to the teachings of sages and worthies. Gradually, you will gain a tacit understanding of them and naturally come to see

that the characteristics with which we are endowed by the Dao of heaven are really within us. If you forsake what I call learning, then there will be nowhere else to apply your efforts.³

Studying human interaction or the natural world to access moral principles is a systematic intellectual exercise. As the *Reflections* anthology puts it, “books are intended to preserve and support one’s mind-and-heart. . . . If one reads, his mind-and-heart will always maintain itself. If not, he will never understand moral principles” (III.74). Commentaries, in the Confucian tradition, were published as interlinear running interpretations of the meaning of each passage in a classic. The insights to be found in the passages of a classic and even in the commentaries of the accepted received editions of those classics were written by either sages or moral worthies, and their value to the reader lay in elucidating the moral principles that connected with the same qualities all humans possess innately.

Besides ethical classics, we can enter into careful discussions of historic events in order to determine the moral lessons that lie in the classics and the histories. As Zhu’s *Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically* recorded the point, “Generally, in reading the Classics and histories, focus on the right and wrong. As you read the right, look for the wrong. As you read the wrong, look for the right. Afterward you’ll understand moral principle.”⁴ In terms of learning from history, one should recall Hu Anguo’s commentary from the Song period on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. His interpretation that Confucius, when he wrote the *Annals*, was taking over the court’s role in revising the state of Lu’s records had been accepted by Zhu Xi, and when the Yuan dynasty established the standard for the Neo-Confucian curriculum, it included Hu’s commentary that makes this point.

Students who took on the intellectual challenge of orally reciting classics from memory, Zhu felt, found that the deeper points in the text would then take on added meaning. The canon of recognized classics would likely need to be reread throughout one’s life to plumb the variety of ethical principles that become visible as one ages and grows in personal experience. Extracting or recognizing moral principles from life and from the fund of past human experience in the classics and histories made it increasingly possible for people to live by moral action in their own lives.

Cheng Yi, Zhu's mentor, felt that there were three ways to recognize principles: (1) study books that elucidate moral principles; (2) discuss history so right and wrong actions, success and failure, can be determined; and (3) settle one's daily affairs in the proper way. Zhang Bo-xing (1652–1725), the great eighteenth-century Neo-Confucian scholar, added that the process began with the Four Books, then moved to the Five Classics, and turned later to the histories.

Zhu described the culmination of the first two steps in the Eight-Step program this way: "After exerting himself [in understanding physical and moral principle] for a long time, the individual will one day experience a breakthrough to integral comprehension. Then the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, refined or coarse, will be apprehended and the mind . . . will all be clearly manifested."⁵ The beautiful sense of order and balance attained by the advanced learner is that an overall comprehension of principles in every part of one's life will transcend any distinction between knowledge of the inner self and the outer world. Zhu describes this in a special note to his commentary on the *Great Learning* by chapter and phrase. Each of us shall then see ourselves as part of nature and nature as similar to us. This occurs when one has been able to adequately (1) recognize (investigate) things and affairs, and (2) extend one's knowing.

Step two begins the internalization in one's mind of the physical and moral principles one has discovered from one's recognition of things and affairs. This stage of the journey still consists largely of intellectual growth and engagement with texts. Ethical classics assume a privileged place in a person's reading even compared to history, as they directly address moral principles.

How, then, does extending one's knowing fit into the process of self-cultivation? The attitude of reverence (*jing*) or inner seriousness is essential to guide this stage of one's joint intellectual and spiritual journey. The connection between extending knowledge and reverence, Zhu noted, is as necessary as two legs for walking.

Abiding in reverence (*ju jing*) and exhaustive recognition of principles (*qiong li*) are the two phases of our moral self-cultivation, and these two phases should be mutually developed. Once there is the ability to exhaustively recognize principles, then persistent abiding [in reverence] will daily advance our moral self-cultivation; and

once we persist in abiding in this [reverence], then our moral self-cultivation will daily improve. It is just like a man with two legs: [when he walks] the left leg moves while the right leg is stationary, and when the right leg moves the left leg is stationary.⁶

In a sense, one is still a relative beginner at steps one and two, a toddler in the process of self-cultivation. One is still working to acquire the habit of continually extending knowledge while guided by a sense of direction from reverence. One without the other will not produce forward motion.

Step Three: Make One's Intentions Sincere

Neo-Confucians argued that disguising bad motives as good behavior is like trying to disguise a rotten egg; it is never effective for long. Despite this, we know that the temptation to tell a white lie about one's intentions — to oneself or to others — exists for anyone. No one sees a person's intention directly, which makes duplicity all the more alluring; eventually, however, one's intentions are revealed as clearly as smells and colors. Instead of waiting to be exposed, however, one could find guidance in the Neo-Confucian advice that, read literally, meant "even when alone, be watchful over yourself" (*shen du*) — a maxim repeated in Zengzi's commentary on the *Great Learning* and that appears again in the *Mean*. Less literally, however, Neo-Confucians saw this tenet as an honest monitoring of one's own unique development as one's humaneness is recovered from within.

Personal self-cultivation becomes the focus of more intensive work in the Eight-Step program beginning with step three, "Make Your Intentions Sincere." First and foremost it demands honesty from oneself about what one is doing, and why. This is not as simple as it may seem. Intentions are the predispositions, either consciously held or not, that precede any action, large or small. Thus step three, if applied to the present, for example, asks a person to critically examine his or her internal decisions even before taking action. Such honesty is what allows one to truly be oneself and to be genuine in relationships, as Zhu Xi noted: "Outwardly doing good things but inwardly in fact feeling quite different is 'self-deception.' It may be compared to a piece of copper that is coated with gold on the outside — inside it is not true gold."

Zhu continued elsewhere, "What about sincerity? It means to engage in neither self-deceit nor reckless abandon."⁷

The antidote to insincerity is the already identified part of self-cultivation that accompanies the recognition of principle, the attitude of mind called reverence, or being respectfully serious. A contemporary parallel in technology might be the instrument called the governor on a machine, which provides self-correcting feedback to an engine so that the movement can maintain itself at the proper speed or pressure. Applied to the work of self-cultivation, one's inner moral seriousness or reverence can likewise monitor the energy level of one's intention to detect any duplicity or self-deception and prevent it from compromising one's sincerity. As Cheng Yi is quoted in the *Reflections on Things at Hand* collection, "If one wants to avoid confusion and disturbance, one's mind must have a master. What can be its master? Reverence and reverence alone" (IV.48).

When a pupil of Cheng Hao (Cheng Yi's older brother) asked how to prevent personal worries from capturing his thoughts, his response clarified the role of a master within the mind.

This is just like resisting robbers in a ruined house. Before you chase away the one who has entered from the east, another one comes from the west. They come in from all directions and there is no time to chase all of them away. The reason is that the house is exposed on all sides so that robbers can come in easily and there is no way for one to be the master of his own house and keep the situation under control.

He continued,

It is like water coming into an empty vessel. Naturally, the water comes in. But if the vessel is filled with water, even if you put it under water, how can water get in? For whatever has a master inside is no longer empty. Since it is not empty, external troubles cannot come in. Then there will be nothing to worry you. (*Reflections* IV.10)

Zhu further commented on this idea: "If one's mind lacks a master, depravity from outside will come to fill it" (*Reflections* IV.48).

Reverence is the internal attitude of mind that one expresses out-

wardly as respect in relationships. It is the one ingredient required to begin and to maintain the sincerity of self-cultivation, and it needs to accompany all Eight Steps. Giving full attention to the moral problem at hand is the initial benefit of reverence, but it continues to assure that the serious concern expressed does indeed result in morally appropriate behavior.

Step Four: Rectify the Mind

All Confucians understood that living on a moral plane required the lifelong self-discipline to make conscious, thoughtful, and humane choices. Step four of the *Great Learning* outlines two basic methods of controlling the mind that composes one's self-discipline. Neither method creates value-free objectivity, but rather improves the empathic identification of principles in things and in oneself.

The first way to rectify the mind is to remain in conscious control of one's thoughts and willpower, which requires vigilant attention and practice in focusing and refocusing on the task at hand. The second is to prevent emotions from distorting one's thoughts and to curb the fleeting passions that, given free rein, could lead to biased and unbalanced judgment. The Chinese term for this combined "rectification" of mind is to "correct"—in the sense of making and keeping upright—just as the ninety-degree angles on its written character, *zheng* 正, illustrates.

If one wants to progress toward humaneness, one cannot afford to allow random, everyday thinking to lead even inadvertently to the inhumane treatment of others. As long as one's mind is consciously present, one has the ability to choose the respectful, empathetic alternative. Yet human beings are all too capable of reacting in relationships in so habitual a way as to give up the conscious operation of thought and willpower. Unfocused habit dulls awareness. When the mind is left to wander, although one might listen to someone, one really does not hear the other person at all. Zhu Xi was clear that any rote thinking in which unexamined habits dominate is not conscious, intentional thinking.

One Neo-Confucian, Zhang Zai, discussed preserving this moral consciousness by listening to the teacher within: "When one starts to rectify his mind, he should regard his own mind as a stern teacher.

Then he will be cautious in all his actions. If he can firmly hold on to this for a year or two, his mind [mind-and-heart] will naturally be rectified" (*Reflections* IV.67; the wording is Wing-tsit Chan's gendered translation). In other words, gradually internalizing a self-critical function for the improvement of your own mind can come about naturally if you keep your moral judgments conscious and unbiased for some time.

In Neo-Confucianism, human nature is seen in a positive light, and human minds are assumed to be capable of judging our own ideas without bias, but such clear judgment is hardest when one is highly emotional. Four emotions, in particular, must be monitored continuously for judgments to remain balanced and correct, and they are singled out in Zengzi's commentary attached to the *Great Learning*.

1. Anger
2. Fear
3. Fondness (doting, as directed at a daughter or son;
Chinese term is *hao le*)
4. Worry

Everyone has had their ideas influenced by such feelings, and all are vulnerable to the distortions in judgment that can result. When any of these influences heavily cloud one's motivations, there is a need to regain composure before too much harm is done. Once balanced again, the mind is more able to judge clearly. As cited by Zhu in the *Further Reflections* collection of his sayings from the eighteenth century,

Maintaining your self-cultivation for a long time will gradually lead to a congenial spirit; a congenial spirit will find one tender, generous, amiable, and agreeable. Anyone who hopes for this must eliminate his ill feelings and break up his anger, and be free of the adversity which invites opposition and attracts indignation. Personal and thorough recognition of things for a long time will gradually lead to the clarification of principle; perfect understanding will find one able to passively influence someone without openly criticizing them. Anyone who heeds this will be well-informed and influential, and free of the worry of rising up in contention and being rejected. Even more must we actively observe the principles

of things and deeply recognize our basic feelings; personally experience these things through your own faculties, carefully think about them through time—do these things and you will be free of the errors of bias and deceit.⁸

Resolve and Reflection

Disciplined motivation is critical in the first four steps of the Eight-Step self-cultivation program. In Confucian literature more broadly, the subject of “resolution to act” (lit., establishing one’s resolve, or *li zhi*) in fact became a leitmotif. There was no Sabbath in Confucianism set aside as a weekly reminder to live up to one’s moral ideals; instead, devotion to one’s family, the right choice of friends, and, most of all, one’s sense of full responsibility for one’s own conduct and character were a person’s most obvious moral touchstones. Teachers and mentors were available in most communities, and many in fact compiled their own books of favorite quotations for the edification of present and future students. One example from the nineteenth century will illustrate: while he ran the Dragon Gate Academy in Shanghai from 1866 to 1880, headmaster Liu Xizai (1813–1881) compiled a collection of sayings to guide his students, titled *Lessons on Maintaining Resolve*. It began with the argument that “the permanence of willpower comes from exercising it,” to inform and exhort students that like a muscle, willpower strengthens through repeated use. Books filled with selected Confucian sayings and quotations like this one became a lasting legacy of hundreds of fine teachers, and they frequently highlighted personal resolve. Maintaining one’s resolve throughout the difficulties of practice allows a person to work on the first five steps consistently, and hence to slowly but steadily nurture the process of becoming humane.

Yet the kind of balanced judgment called for in rectifying the mind requires more than a strong, persevering will; the ability to reflect is equally important. The second paragraph of the *Great Learning* indicates that reflection in turn presumes a state of mind called being at peace. The peace of mind advocated in the *Great Learning* is itself a kind of composure. Such calm preparedness is akin to the attitude of those who are “unflappable” in a crisis—they maintain mental composure in the midst of tense action. Similarly, a sage would be composed in his or her activity.

The important role of imagination in Confucian ethics begins with

empathy, which requires a person to imagine how one would feel if in the same situation described by another. The metaphorical possibilities that are liberated by imagination transport thinking to the invisible moral or spiritual plane. One perceptive Neo-Confucian, Ye Cai (fl. 1248 CE), chose the physical image of a serene pond to help imagine the purpose of reflection in the *Great Learning*. He asked the reader to think of the physical properties of water, and when it can and cannot reflect. “Brilliance and intelligence result if the mind is tranquil and calm. Still water can reflect. But running water cannot. The principle is the same” (*Reflections* IV.69).

One can apply this imaginative insight to relationships. For example, suppose a friend or loved one is trying to communicate a complex need or desire to you. If your own desires, your own ego, and your own needs fill your mind while you attempt to listen, you are not likely to hear an unfiltered version of what that person is saying. But if you are as serene as a quiet pond, you are more likely to reflect, mirror-like, the reality opposite you. Eliminating the disruption of your own interests allows a serene mind to more sincerely and correctly perceive what is communicated, which thus makes it much easier to humanely put oneself in the shoes of another.

Step Five: Cultivating the Person

The fifth step mandates a regular practice of *sustaining* our honest intentions and correct actions. In the first four steps one has established a practice of recognizing, extending, making sincere, and rectifying. The next step, cultivating the person, includes control of the body (note that the term for body in step five, *shen* 身, also means “person” or “being”). Zhu Xi viewed anger or rage as something that would unbalance the mind-and-heart. Step five maintains the role of one’s innate luminous virtue in the face of desires and emotions that could otherwise obscure one’s inner goodness. Resolutely maintaining the values that one has made upright in step four means that one has found one’s moral values and voice and will thereafter know what one stands for in the complex and unpredictable world of social relationships.

Many people do good deeds and are generally honest in their relationships, yet they do not achieve the consistency of moral action that would distinguish a truly humane person. The difference is like that between a professional athlete and a “weekend warrior”; consistency

comes with professional training. As Zhu put it, “There are those who only know to make their intentions sincere but are unable to keep close watch over the preservation of their minds: and so they are incapable of *maintaining* their inner correctness and of cultivating their persons.”⁹

The analogy of the serious athlete versus the casual one shows that semi-conscious habitual actions, or going through the motions, are not enough. In fact, passive, habitual moral action is precisely what step five eliminates. The traditional commentary attributed to Zengzi points out that “if the mind is not present one looks but does not see, listens but does not hear, eats but does not appreciate the flavor.”¹⁰ Presence of mind, or fully paying attention, is an attitude with which one should approach others. Like a highly focused participant in a game of chess, this attitude serves as an “inner mental attentiveness” to maintain conscious control over intentionality and moral action.

Confucius made clear that truly humane conduct requires moral responsibilities, but such responsibilities are not a pro-forma observation of a list of rules and prohibitions. As he put it, “Becoming [morally] authoritative is self-originating — how could it originate in others?” (*Analects* 12.1). That is, rather than submitting to an imposed external authority, this growth must come from inside. Neo-Confucians after 1000 CE were especially insistent that right thinking is inseparable from willpower, motivation, and feelings. Confucians considered the behavioral change present in practicing a virtue to actually be part of understanding it. In his *Reflections on Things at Hand*, Zhu selected a passage from Zhang Zai arguing that anyone attaining “humaneness in the highest degree” would become a living exemplar of the behavioral norms of humaneness and would be described as “respectful, reverent, inclined to restraint, and yielding” (XI.18). In other words, ethical understanding is both internal and visibly tied to one’s conduct.

Confucius himself gave some guidance for the sort of self-discipline that would prevent one from doing wrong each day. Asked for details on what would be necessary to practice humaneness, Confucius answered, in *Analects* 12.1, “Do not look at anything that violates ritual propriety; do not listen to anything that violates ritual propriety; do not speak about anything that violates ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates ritual propriety.” Fifteen hundred years later Cheng Yi transformed this advice into a list of admonitions that he could

review regularly for his own edification. The term “propriety” in his passage below refers to the ethical norms of society one has chosen to live by.

Admonition on Seeing:

The mind is originally vacuous [that is, in a state of
consciousness]

It responds to things without leaving any observable trace.

There are essentials in controlling it [the mind],

The foremost of which is the regulation of its seeing.

If obscurations of selfish desires multiply before one’s eyes,

One’s mind will be lured away.

Control its external activities

So its internal state will be secured.

Discipline yourself and return to propriety

After a long time, you will be sincere.

Admonition on Hearing:

If one is tempted by the knowledge of external things and is
overcome by material desires,

He will lose the good nature he has received.

Eminent are those who are the first to understand.

They know on what to rest and are calm.

Guard against depravity and preserve sincerity.

Do not listen to what is contrary to propriety.

Admonition on Speech:

The activities of the human mind

Are expressed through words.

If in one’s expression he allows no rashness or falsehood,

He will be tranquil and concentrated within.

More especially, words are a turning point

That can lead to hostility or amity.

Good and evil fortune, and glory and shame,

Are all invited by them.

When they are defective by being lighthearted,
they will be heedless.

And when they are defective by being too many,
they will be fragmentary.

To lose control of oneself is to violate the principle of things.
 What one does to others will be done to him.
 Do not say anything contrary to propriety.
 Respectfully obey the injunction of the Sage.

Admonition on Action:

Wise men know the subtle, incipient, activating force of things,
 And therefore are sincere in their thoughts.
 Resolute scholars exert themselves in their actions
 And hold fast to [their minds-and-hearts] in whatever they do.
 He who follows principles will enjoy peace and abundance.
 He who follows desires will be in danger.
 Do not forget this for a moment.
 Conduct yourself with apprehension and caution.
 If one's cultivation matches one's originally good nature,
 In the end he will be the same as the sages and worthies.
 (*Reflections* V.3)

The Cult of the Accomplished Student

The *Analects* was the oldest of the Four Books, and one important reason it never became outmoded in Confucian education was because the lives of Confucius' immediate disciples as portrayed there provided concrete guidance for the difficult process of self-cultivation. This was particularly true in the case of Confucius' favorite student, Hui, who remained a kind of case study in how to conduct step five of the Eight Steps and in what it means to cultivate the person.

Neo-Confucians, in fact, built a small cult around the personality of this exemplar of successful self-cultivation. Cheng Hao, in particular, warned students that leaping ahead of the *Analects* to the *Mencius*, the third of the Four Books, was a mistake, albeit a tempting one. To improve the students on their way to sagehood, Cheng advised them to turn, instead, to the specific examples recorded in the *Analects* of decisions made by Hui. His experiences were clearly recorded and available to guide a student to live morally, which required undergoing a difficult process of discovery and recognition of moral principles.

One can find within the *Analects* a few traits about Hui: first, he did not transfer his anger to others (6.3), and second, he did not repeat a mistake (6.3). Thus when Hui did become angry, he never allowed

his feelings to resurface in an unrelated interaction with someone else—for example, at home or in the marketplace. Such an action sounds simple enough: leave family issues at home and do not bring work issues to the home. And yet how many people bring their work stress to their interactions after work? How many dysfunctional personal relationships overflow into professional problems? This type of self-control should apply to any of the most common seven feelings distinguished by Neo-Confucians: pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire. The Song-era Neo-Confucians excerpted in *Reflections on Things at Hand* were careful to describe what it was like to work diligently on humaneness yet remain short of sagehood, and Hui became the test case: “The sage ‘apprehends without thinking and hits upon what is right without effort.’ Hui had to think before apprehending, and had to make an effort before hitting upon what is right. The difference between him and the sage is as little as a moment of breathing. What was lacking in him was that he held on to [goodness] but was not yet completely transformed [into goodness itself]. Since he loved to learn, had he lived longer, he would have achieved transformation in a short time” (II.3). Admiration for such an exemplary student clearly facilitated the efforts of new students working to cultivate the person. Ironically, Hui’s shortcomings made him a more effective example; he was still a work in progress. He was a man who still had to *decide* not to transfer his anger and not to repeat a mistake. A sage, on the other hand, would not need to think about it and choose among alternatives at all—the sage would automatically do the right thing.

Another example of Hui’s accomplishments that help students self-cultivate is a passage in the *Analects* where Hui tells Confucius what he would most like to do in life—namely, to be able to refrain from bragging about his abilities or exaggerating his accomplishments. Unlike a sage—and like the rest of us—Hui still had to consciously work to overcome these temptations, and that is why it is helpful to study his life. As Cheng Yi states in *Reflections on Things at Hand*, “Since he was unable to ‘hit upon what is right without effort,’ or to ‘give his mind-and-heart free rein without overstepping the [moral] boundaries,’ this means he made mistakes. But he was intelligent and strong. Therefore, whenever he did anything wrong, he never failed to correct it right away. Thus he never reached the point requiring repentance. . . . The way of learning is none other than to change one’s ways imme-

diately and follow the good as soon as one realizes that one has done something wrong" (V.4).

The Host-Guest Metaphor

Confucius praised the accomplishments of Hui in the following way: "The Master said, 'As for Hui, he could go three months without in his mind ever departing from humaneness. The others can do so for a day or a month, but that is all!'" (Watson, *Analects* 6.7). Zhang Zai's excerpt in the *Reflections on Things at Hand* anthology rephrased this fifteen hundred years later and added a metaphor noting that having nothing in one's heart contrary to humaneness for three months was comparable to making humaneness the host, while shorter visits by humaneness in their hearts made it like a guest. Zhu Xi, in his own later commentary on Zhang's metaphor, continued, "Not to have anything contrary to humaneness means that humaneness is inside the person and is the host or master. But it is not entirely at home and sometimes leaves him. To achieve humaneness for a day or a month means that humaneness is outside of the person and is a guest. Although it sometimes comes in, it does not stay long" (IV.64). The host is also the master of the house (and in fact the Chinese term *zhu* 主 meant both "master" and "host," depending upon the context in which it was used, so the two meanings easily conflate as the reader sees that the host welcoming guests to a home can also be considered the master of the house). This accomplishment of maintaining nothing but humaneness in one's heart for three months remained the gold standard for later Confucians working on their own self-cultivation.

Unlike these passages about Hui in the *Analects*, the *Mencius* does not address specific details of how someone like Hui practiced his love of learning. The Neo-Confucians created a blueprint of the Eight Steps mentioned in the *Great Learning*, then instructed students to read the *Analects* for real-life stories of the experiences of Confucius' disciples. As one commentator selected in the *Reflections on Things at Hand* anthology concluded around 1250 CE, "What is beyond the ability to have for three months nothing contrary to humaneness [in one's heart] is a quality belonging to one who is great and completely transformed so that he *is humaneness itself*" (IV.64; emphasis added). This is the ultimate stage of cultivating the person and can be considered coterminous with sagehood.

Another of Hui's statements preserved in the *Analects* was understood by many Neo-Confucians to mean that Hui, despite his unerring dedication, did not attain humaneness in his short life (he died at the age of thirty-two).

Yan Hui, with a deep sigh, said, "The more I look up at it, the higher it soars; the more I penetrate into it, the harder it becomes. I am looking at it in front of me, and suddenly it is behind me. The Master is good at drawing me forward a step at a time; he broadens me with culture and disciplines my behavior through the observance of ritual propriety. Even if I wanted to quit, I could not. And when I have exhausted my abilities, it is as though something rises up right in front of me, and even though I want to follow it, there is no road to take. (9.11)

The "it" Hui was searching for was the attainment of humaneness, which, if sustained over time, constituted sagehood. One great strength of the Neo-Confucians during the Song dynasty was their refinement of the practical process of how to conduct the program of self-cultivation. Among other nuances, they were able to distinguish different levels of achievement among the disciples of Confucius, based on each student's questions and answers to the Master as described in the *Analects*.

Sequence Is Appropriate to Refined Levels of Self-Cultivation

To some extent, the subtle meaning of what lies ahead in building humaneness can be grasped only by the advanced practitioner who has become adept at self-cultivation. Short of this high level of achievement, perhaps only the metaphorical imagination has the capacity to provide a glimpse of becoming one with humaneness. The traditionally accepted commentator on the *Great Learning*, whom Zhu Xi was convinced was Zengzi, elaborated, citing a poem that appears in the *Classic of Odes* that suggests the systematic work required of cultivating oneself was practiced among the ancient sage kings and princes.

There is our elegant and accomplished prince —
 As if cutting and filing,
 As if chiseling and polishing,
 [So he cultivates himself!]

Zengzi continued, “‘As if cutting and filing’ [the bone] speaks to the process of learning; ‘as if chiseling and polishing’ [the jade] to the process of self-cultivation.”¹¹

Years later Zhu added his own analysis to Zengzi’s and highlighted an insight in the *Great Learning*—namely that the *proper sequence* in studying or cultivating oneself is one critical dimension in making this process succeed. Expanding on the gemology metaphor, Zhu emphasized the proper order of events by showing how to transform a rough gem into a jewel: “One cuts with a knife or a saw and chisels with a mallet or chisel to pare an object to a desired shape. One files with a rasp or a plane and polishes with sand or stone to give an object a smooth finish. In crafting bone and horn, one cuts then files repeatedly. In crafting jade and stone, one chisels then polishes repeatedly. Both of these cases show that in crafting an object there is a proper sequence according to which the object is brought to perfection.”¹²

Each person can aspire to the ideal of the utmost good that is possible in the cultivation of a sage, but rubbing a rough piece of jade with another stone of identical hardness will yield no increase in luster. Cultivation of the person requires enough prior learning to acquire a knowledge of people, and it entails a strictly ordered, sequential process of refinement. The only quotation from the Neo-Confucian Shao Yong in the *Reflections on Things at Hand* anthology speaks to this issue by elaborating on a line from the *Classic of Odes* (line 184), “There are other hills whose stones are good for grinding tools; there are other hills whose stones are good for working jade.”

In explaining the saying, “Stones in the yonder hills can polish jade,” Yaofu [Shao Yong] said, “Jade is a gentle and smooth thing. If two pieces of jade are used to polish each other, neither will be polished. It is necessary to get a hard and rough thing to polish them. Take the case of a [morally] superior man associating with an inferior man. As the inferior man encroaches upon him, he will cultivate and examine himself, become cautious toward the inferior man and avoid him, stimulate his own mind and harden his nature, improve himself in order to prevent any future trouble. Then the principle of the saying will become clear.” (*Reflections* V.15)

The experienced teacher will push the student with increasingly challenging work, but only at a pace such that the student is able to

assimilate points. Sima Guang, in the early Song period, wrote the first commentary on the *Great Learning*, and Cheng Hao singled out the *Great Learning* partly because he saw that sequential stages were distinguished in its progression. Cheng Yi put Cheng Hao's affinity for the short *Great Learning* classic this way:

There were many students in the Master's [Cheng Hao's] school. The Master's words were simple, easy, and easily understood. Both the morally accomplished worthy and the student benefited from them, as if all drank from the river, each to the limit of his capacity. In teaching people, from the extension of knowledge to knowing where to abide, from the sincerity of intentions to bringing peace to all, and from sprinkling and sweeping the floor and answering questions to investigating principle to the utmost and fully developing one's nature, the Master followed a definite order, for he was afraid that students of the day would neglect what is near at hand and run after the remote, peep at what is lofty while they were on the low level, and consequently would easily regard themselves as superior, and in the end fail to accomplish anything. (*Reflections* XIV.17)

The correct order of learning texts, and the correct pace of mastering them, instills self-restraint in the learner that leads to gradual improvement.

Extension on the Basis of Similarity in Kind

Imagination is another essential element of cultivating the person to extend one's humaneness. There are specific attitudes that can block one's imagination from seeing the similarity between ideas that should otherwise allow one to progress. The similarity between the mind-and-heart of a sage such as Confucius, for example, and the nature of Heaven and Earth would be one such parallel a person should be able to apprehend. Cheng Hao singled out four kinds of attitudes that are obstacles in the search for sagehood: arbitrary or capricious thinking, as it leaves an opening in one's thinking for selfish ideas and therefore must be eliminated; egotistical and authoritarian thinking are two more, which also invite the unwanted impositions of one's own views on otherwise balanced judgments; and obstinate or stubborn thinking, which binds the mind-and-heart to the confines of fixed attitudes and prejudices.

An affectionate attitude toward one's parents can provide a natural basis for each person to extend that affectionate feeling to humaneness to all older people, and even to all human beings. The reason, Neo-Confucians argued, was that the class of "people in general" is similar enough to parents that each person can generalize one's parental affection to others who are not one's parents. Love for parents teaches love for humanity. The next step above being humane to all people was considered close enough to "love for all living things" that it was natural for Confucians committed to self-cultivation to then develop a love for all creatures. As Cheng Hao is quoted in *Reflections on Things at Hand*, "The man of humaneness regards Heaven and Earth and all creatures as one body. To him there is nothing that is not himself. . . . Therefore to be charitable and to assist all things is the function of a sage" (I.20). One can imagine an expanding set of concentric circles reaching farther and farther from the self, eventually embracing all of nature.

Progress in increasing one's humaneness would then lead to emotional, moral, and spiritual transformation. As the *Mencius* pointed out, "People all have things that they will not bear. To extend this reaction to that which they will bear is humaneness" (7B31). The closer a person comes to becoming one with humaneness, the more humaneness is not just mentally understood, but also becomes part of one's identity. It cannot be accomplished all at once. When that love has been practiced and extended so that one is capable of generalizing it to humane love for all living things in the universe, one begins to approach sagehood.

Zhang Zai wrote an advanced Neo-Confucian essay on the substance of humaneness in which he argued that once one begins to identify with humaneness, the process can be nourished by continuing to understand the moral principles in passages of the ethical classics. This insightful document, "The Western Inscription," was originally titled "Correcting Obstinacy," and in it Zhang reveals where this advanced work eventually leads.

The Western Inscription

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore that which extends throughout the universe I regard

as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

The great ruler [the emperor] is the eldest son of my parents [Heaven and Earth], and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged — this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show affection toward the orphaned and the weak — this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. The sage identifies his virtue with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the best [among the children of Heaven and Earth]. Even those who are tired and infirm, crippled or sick, those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.

When the time comes, to keep himself from harm — this is the care of a son. To rejoice in Heaven and have no anxiety — this is filiality at its purest.

One who disobeys [the principle of Heaven] violates virtue. One who destroys is a robber. One who promotes evil lacks [moral] capacity. But one who puts his moral nature into practice and brings his physical existence to complete fulfillment can match [Heaven and Earth].

One who knows the principles of transformation will skillfully carry forward the undertakings [of Heaven and Earth], and one who penetrates spirit to the highest degree will skillfully carry out their will.

Do nothing shameful even in the recesses of your own home and thus bring dishonor to it. Preserve the mind and nourish the nature and thus [serve them] with untiring effort.

The great Yu shunned pleasant wine but attended to the protection and support of his parents. Border Warden Ying cared for the young and thus extended his love to his own kind.

Emperor Shun's merit lay in delighting his parents with unceasing effort, and Shensheng's reverence [Shensheng was a prince who committed suicide when falsely accused of murdering his father] was demonstrated when he awaited punishment without making an attempt to escape.

Zeng Can received his body from his parents and reverently kept

it intact throughout life, while [Yin] Boqi vigorously obeyed his father's command.

Wealth, honor, blessing, and benefit are meant for the enrichment of my life, while poverty, humble station, care, and sorrow will be my helpmates to fulfillment.

In life I follow and serve [Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace.¹³

Neo-Confucian teachers such as Cheng Hao said that when they heard the bray of a donkey or the whinny of a horse, they felt commonality with those animals. Zhou Dunyi, feeling kinship with the plant world, even refused to cut the grass outside his window. Of course, this humane empathy for nature based on the extension of one's inner humaneness will initially seem unreachable or even absurd. One begins self-cultivation with simply trying to simultaneously recognize principles in nature and in oneself. Even talented and serious new students of Confucianism were often kept from studying such ecstatic statements as the "The Western Inscription" for some time. Access to the *Great Learning*, with its systematic Eight-Step program of ordered instructions, might also be withheld for half a year or more in favor of the primers that served as preparatory ladders to the Four Books. One should first study more basic texts such as the *Mencius*, and passages in it such as the following that address an idea developed in more advanced texts: "Mencius said, 'That by which humans differ from animals is slight. The masses abandon it. The exemplary person prefers it. . . . He [the sage] *acted out of* humaneness and rightness; he *did not act out* humaneness and rightness' (4B19; emphasis added). Zhu Xi felt that correct learning allowed a morally clarified person to act from the source of these two innate moral principles, humaneness and rightness, as if they were second nature to that person.