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## ZHU XI'S CONVERSATIONS WITH HIS DISCIPLES

*The revival of Confucianism in the Song period was accomplished in large part by great teachers who gathered around them adult students intent on learning more about the wisdom of the sages and how to apply it in their lives. The students were usually expecting to attempt the civil service examinations, but the most inspiring teachers urged their disciples to set their sights on the higher goals of knowledge and self-cultivation.*

*Perhaps the greatest of all these teachers was Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Immensely learned in the classics, commentaries, histories, and the teachings of his predecessors, Zhu Xi managed to serve several times in office, write, compile, or edit almost a hundred books, correspond with dozens of other scholars, and still regularly teach groups of disciples, many of whom stayed with him for years at a time. Zhu Xi considered himself a follower of the Cheng brothers Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107), and elaborated their metaphysical theories about the workings of the cosmos in terms of principle (li) and qi (vital energies, material force, psychophysical stuff). In the conversations which his disciples recorded, however, he also discussed all sorts of other issues relevant to their understanding of nature, the past, and how to conduct their lives. The selection below is only a tiny fraction of the thousands of conversations his followers recorded.*

A student asked, "Do dried and withered things have principle?"

Zhu Xi responded, "Once an object exists, it has a principle. Heaven didn't invent writing brushes; it was human beings who took rabbit hairs to make them. But once there were brushes, there was a principle for them."

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A student asked, "Principle is something people and animals alike get from Heaven. What about insentient things? Do they also have principle?"

"Certainly they have principle," Zhu Xi responded. "For instance, boats can only travel on water and carts can only travel on land."

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A student asked, "How can we distinguish the Way from principle?"

Zhu Xi responded, "The Way is the path. Principle is the pattern."

"Is it like the grain in wood?"

Zhu Xi answered, "Yes."

The student then commented, "If that is the case, the Way and principle seem to be the same."

"The word 'Way' covers a great deal," Zhu Xi said. "Principle consists in the many veins encompassed by the Way." He added, "The Way is the whole; principle is the fine structure."

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Wang Zichong asked, "When I was in Hunan, I met a master who taught people only what actions to take."

Zhu Xi responded, "If a person does not understand the moral principles, how can he take actions?"

"This teacher explained, 'Once you practice it, you will understand it.'"

"Compare this to a person walking along a road," Zhu Xi said. "If he does not see it, how can he walk on it? Lots of people today teach people how to act. They all set their own standards, then teach them to others. Naturally a good person of average disposition does not have to probe into the principles of things or study extensively. But the sage wrote the *Great Learning* to help people move into the realm of sages. When people have fully grasped the principles, they will naturally be filial in their service to their parents, respectful to their elder brothers, and worthy of their friends' trust."

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A student asked, "What should I do about being confused by different theories when I read?"

Zhu Xi answered, "Start with an open mind, then read one theory. Read one view before reading another. After you have read them again and again, what is right and wrong, useful and useless, will become apparent of itself. The process can be compared to trying to discover whether a person

is good or bad. You observe him wherever he goes, notice what he says or does, and then know if he is good or bad." He also said, "You simply must have an open mind," and "Wash away your old opinions to let new ideas in."

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A student asked, "What can I do to attain a reverent attitude?"

Zhu Xi said, "Simply do this: on the inside, have no foolish thoughts, on the outside, have no foolish actions."

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A student asked, "How can a person develop his sincerity and reverence and get rid of his desires?"

Zhu Xi responded, "These are the end-points. Sincerity requires getting rid of all sorts of falseness. Reverence requires getting rid of all sorts of laziness. Desires should be blocked."

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Zhengchun said, "I'd like to survey a great many books."

"Don't do that," Zhu Xi said. "Read one book thoroughly, then read another one. If you confusedly try to advance on several fronts, you will end up with difficulties. It's like archery. If you are strong enough for a five-pint bow, use a four-pint one. You will be able to draw it all the way and still have strength left over. Students today do not measure their own strength when reading books. I worry that we cannot manage what we already have set ourselves."

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A student asked whether studying for the examinations would interfere with his efforts at real learning. Zhu Xi responded, "Master Cheng said, 'Don't worry about it interfering with your efforts, worry about it robbing you of your determination.' If you spend ten days a month preparing for the examinations, you will still have twenty days to do real study. If it changes your determination, however, there is no cure."

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Renfu asked about the saying, "Human goodness is the principle underlying love."

Zhu Xi said, "This saying makes sense if you think about the mind, nature, and feelings. The mind is the master of the body. A person's nature consists in humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. They find their expression in the feelings of commiseration, shame, deference, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Commiseration is love, the beginning of human goodness. Human goodness is the substance, while love is an aspect of its function."

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A student inquired, "Human nature is just the nature of Heaven and earth. In the beginning it didn't come from somewhere else, nor does it later go back to another place. It just seems this way from the condensing or dispersing of *qi*."

Zhu Xi responded, "You're right, it doesn't return anywhere at the end. It is like the reflection of the moon in a pan of water. Without the pan of water, there would be no reflection. No one could suppose the reflection flies into the sky to return to the moon. It's also like a flower dropping and then being gone. How could you think it went somewhere and next year will be reborn on this branch?"

The student also asked, "How can we analyze popular theories about anomalies, demons, and the like?"

Zhu Xi said, "Eighty percent of what ordinary people say is nonsense, but twenty percent is accurate. In most of these cases, the person's life span was not up when he was drowned, or murdered, or fell victim to a violent illness. Since his *qi* had not been exhausted, he was able to possess people. There are also cases of people who die suddenly and their *qi* hasn't yet completely dispersed because of the richness of their original endowment. Eventually their *qi* does disperse, for essence and *qi* are combined to produce people and things. As in the phrase, "The wandering of the spirit becomes change," there

will be no more *qi*. For when people talk about immortals, they only talk about ones from recent times. The immortals of antiquity are no longer seen. The *Zuo Commentary* tells the story of Boyu wreaking revenge, but no one sees his ghost today."

The student also asked, "Mr. Xie said, 'My ancestors' spirit is my own spirit.' Do you agree?"

"The sentence puts it very well," Zhu Xi responded. "Ancestors and descendants have only one *qi*. When sincerity and reverence are fully developed, they can affect each other. It can be compared to a large tree whose seeds are on the ground. When they grow and become trees, they are in fact that large tree."

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A student asked, "What should an educated man do if he is marrying an ordinary person and he wishes to perform the proper rituals but the other family disagrees?"

Zhu Xi smiled, looked at Yigang for a long time, then said, "This is a waste of effort. All that is needed is to send someone to talk it over with the other family. The ancient rituals are less trouble. Why wouldn't they be willing to practice them?"

Zhiqing said, "If there are steps in the ancient rituals that are very hard to practice, you don't have to insist on them. For instance, the part about revolving the carriage wheels three times. This doesn't mean that you have to revolve the sedan chair three times." Even the master laughed in response to this.

Yigang said, "If the customary practices don't harm moral principle very much, would it be all right to retain a small number of them?"

Zhu Xi said, "Yes."

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Zhu Xi said, "When wind acts on things, it enters into all of them. Today coffins are buried in the ground. To a small extent they get blown, some even blown over."

A student asked, "If one places an object on

the ground, even a fierce wind will not necessarily be able to move it. Since the ground is so strong and solid, how could wind blow through it to move things?"

Zhu Xi answered, "I think that in the ground when wind collects together and wants to come out, its power intensifies, but when it is out on the flat land, its *qi* disperses."

The student said, "Perhaps there is no such principle."

Zhu Xi said, "In Zhenghe county, a man buried his parent at a certain place. After the burial he heard sounds from the grave from time to time. His family thought that these sounds occurred because the place was good. After a long time the family property slowly declined and the descendants became poor. They thought that the place was unfortunate so took the coffin out to look at it. They found that one side had been smashed and was ruined. The place it had been was exactly in the front part of the pit, the part formed by curved bricks, where the coffin enters."

The student said, "Perhaps water caused this."

Zhu Xi answered, "No. If water had entered, how could there have been the sound of hitting? I don't know what the explanation is."

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A student asked, "What should one do if before a parent died, he or she left instructions to have Buddhists perform the services?"

Zhu Xi responded, "This is a difficult question."

The student persisted, "So should he employ them or not?"

Zhu Xi said, "There are some things the heart of a child cannot bear to do. This issue requires careful consideration."

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A student asked, "What if one's mother dies and one's father is still alive and the father wants to follow customary practices with regard to mourning garments, employ Buddhist monks for services, and have the body cremated?"

Zhu Xi responded, "What do you think?"

The student responded, "One could not obey."

Zhu Xi said, "The first two are superficial matters. If it is as you say, obeying would be all right. But cremation cannot be practiced."

Yong said, "Cremation destroys the parents' remains."

Zhu Xi added, "Discussing it along with mourning garments and Buddhist services shows an inability to recognize degrees of importance."

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A student asked, "When Yang forces first moved and gave birth to people and things, it seems they all were produced at once, but according to the theory [of the great ultimate], it seems they were produced in stages."

Zhu Xi responded, "We can't give the order, but there must have been stages. Shao Yong calculated back 128,000. What was it like before that? There must have been a world before the great ultimate, like last night and this morning. Yin and Yang set things in motion all at once, but before then, there must have been dimness that gradually became clear. Therefore there were these stages present in it all along."

The student also asked, "If we thus speculate about the period before the great ultimate, will the period after it be similar?"

Zhu Xi responded, "Certainly. Master Cheng said, 'Movement and quiescence have no beginning; Yin and Yang have no starting point,' which clarifies it. Today on high mountains there are rocks with oyster shells in them, showing that a low place has become a high one. Further, oysters have to live in muddy sand, but now they are in rock, so what was soft became hard. The cosmos changes; there is no constancy."

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A student asked, "Recently Liao Zihui said that when he visited you this year he asked you about Master Yanping's doctrine of quiet sitting, and that you had some disagreements with it. Is that so?"

Zhu Xi responded, "This is a difficult topic."

There is no harm in someone who understands principle sitting quietly, but it is not right to insist on quiet sitting. Those who understand principle thoroughly are naturally quiet. Nowadays, people insist on quiet sitting to get out of doing things. That won't do. I once heard Master Li say that when he first heard Master Luo lecture on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* he was not impressed and wondered how much understanding Luo had attained by quiet sitting at Mount Luo-fou. I also had doubts, but now I think it works. How can a person whose mind is excited perceive principle? One must be quiet to perceive it. What is called quiet sitting simply means having nothing on one's mind. When one's mind is thus clear, principle will make itself known, and the mind will become even clearer and quieter."

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A student asked, "When selfish thoughts arise, I immediately weed them out, but even though I get rid of the stems and branches, the roots remain, and when I encounter a similar stimulus, they arise again. What can I do about it?"

Zhu Xi responded, "That is just the way it is. That is why [Confucius's disciple] Zengzi said, 'In trepidation, as though standing on a precipice or on thin ice.'"

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Zhu Xi asked Kuang, "How long have you been here?"

"Eighty-five days."

"Aren't you going tomorrow?"

Kuang said, "Early tomorrow I will be saying goodbye."

Zhu Xi said, "Do you have any remaining doubts?"

"Right now I have no points that need clarifying, but as I apply myself, some will surely arise, so I will write you letters to ask for your instruction."

Zhu Xi said, "Just work hard at applying yourself. The biggest fear for a student is that he will grow lax. Do not expect instant results. If today you learn something or put something into prac-

tice, that is something positive. Just do not stop. Little by little you will gain a thorough understanding. If there are points you are not clear about, think about them yourself, don't rely on others or wait until you can ask questions. If there is no one to ask, you might give up. People advance in their learning when they can rid themselves of the desire to depend on others."

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Dou said his dreams were very garbled. Zhu Xi responded, "The spiritual soul and the earthly soul interact to constitute sleep. The mind is still present and can think as usual. That is how dreams result." Zhu Xi then discussed his own experiences, "When I was sick for several days, I dreamed only about explaining the *Book of Documents*. Once when serving in office I dreamed only about judging legal cases."

Dou said, "These are still daily affairs."

Zhu Xi said, "Even though these are everyday affairs, still they shouldn't appear in dreams."

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Every evening when his students gathered, one of the older ones would start to chat as soon as he sat down. Zhu Xi scolded him, "Sir, you are over forty and still do not understand the books you read, yet as soon as you sit down you talk about other people's affairs. On some recent nights you gentlemen have chatted idly until ten P.M. While we are gathered together, why don't you reflect on yourself or do serious work rather than talk about trivial things?" He then sighed and sighed.

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Zhu Xi had an asthma attack and for days none of his students asked him any questions. One evening he summoned them to his room. The students still did not ask any questions. Zhu Xi angrily demanded, "You gentlemen are just sitting idly. If you are not going to do anything, why don't you go home? Why did you come here from so far away?"

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A student asked, "What are the differences between the Buddhist and Taoist doctrines of non-being?"

Zhu Xi said, "To Laozi, being existed. This can be seen from his saying, 'I want to see the subtlety of nonbeing; I want to see the results of being.'

The Buddhists consider Heaven and earth to be illusory and the four elements [earth, water, fire, and wind] to be temporary combinations. Thus to them everything is nonbeing."

*Translated by Patricia Ebrey*

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