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An Inquiry into Wang Yang-ming's Four-Sentence Teaching

TU WEI-MING

IN this exploratory essay, I would like to argue that Wang Yang-ming's 王陽明 (Shou-jen 守仁, 1472–1529) Four-Sentence Teaching, as interpreted by one of his immediate successors, comes very close to the spirit of Ch'an (Zen). This certainly raises the intriguing question, "How Buddhist is Wang Yang-ming?" Instead of addressing myself to a general interpretation of Yang-ming's spiritual orientation, however, I will confine my efforts to an analysis of the philosophical import of the Four-Sentence Teaching. Although I still maintain that Yang-ming by a conscious choice clearly identified himself with the Confucian Way, I am now convinced that a sophisticated appreciation of his mode of thinking also requires an investigation of its relationship to Ch'an. Without such an investigation, I would contend, it is impossible to probe the subtleness of Yang-ming's teachings, especially those just prior to his departure for Ssu-en and T'ien-chou in 1527. Of course by focusing my attention on this aspect of Yang-ming's religio-philosophy, I do not mean to rule out the possibility that in other aspects he might have been influenced more deeply by Taoism. My central concern here is simply to present an inquiry into one of his most significant attempts at the formulation of his ideas, which, in my opinion, particularly illustrates his Ch'an-like wisdom.

The question whether the mind-in-itself (*bsin-t'i* 心體), intention (*i* 意), *liang-chih* 良知, and thing (*wu* 物) are all beyond the distinction of good and evil is a basic ground of contention between Yang-ming's two prominent disciples, Ch'ien Te-hung 錢德洪 (Hsü-shan 緒山, 1496–1574) and Wang Chi 王畿 (Lung-hsi 龍溪, 1489–1583). The whole issue centers around Yang-ming's famous Four-Sentence Teaching:¹

¹ See note on page 46.

WANG YANG-MING'S FOUR-SENTENCE TEACHING

There is neither good nor evil in the mind-in-itself.

無善無惡是心之體

There are both good and evil in the activation of intentions.

有善有惡是意之動

Knowing good and evil is the [faculty] of *liang-chih*.

知善知惡是良知

Doing good and removing evil is the rectification of things.

為善去惡是格物

While Ch'ien Te-hung accepts the Teaching as the Master's doctrine in four axioms, Lung-hsi doubts that it is the ultimate formulation of Yang-ming's view on the matter. He argues that if the mind-in-itself is without good and evil, then the intention, knowledge, and thing should all be without good and evil. On the other hand, if the intention is not devoid of good and evil, there must be good and evil in the mind-in-itself. Lung-hsi's argument points to a fundamental problem in Yang-ming's religio-philosophy.

It should be noted that underlying the Four-Sentence Teaching is a set of assumptions which first appeared in the *Great Learning* (*Ta-hsüeh* 大學). Actually the four sentences are structurally comparable to the first four "steps" of the eightfold process in the *Great Learning*.² In a separate study, I have characterized them as the "inner dimension" of self-cultivation (*hsiu-sben* 修身), as contrasted with its "outer manifestation" such as regulating the family (*ch'i-chia* 齊家), ordering the state (*chin-kuo* 治國), and bringing peace throughout the world (*p'ing ti'en-hsia* 平天下). The first four steps consist of (1) investigation of things (*ko-wu* 格物), (2) extension of knowledge (*chih-chih* 致知), (3)

² The eightfold process of the *Great Learning* appears as follows: "The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things." See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 86.

sincerity of the will (*ch'eng-i* 誠意), and (4) rectification of the mind (*cheng-bsin* 正心). If we focus our attention on the wording of the Chinese text, it is clear that the key concepts are identical to those of the Four-Sentence Teaching: *bsin* (mind), *i* (will, intention), *chib* (knowledge), and *wu* (thing). Since Yang-ming perceives *ko-wu* (investigation of things) as the rectification of things and *chib-chib* (extension of knowledge) as the extension of *liang-chib*, the interpreted meanings of the four steps in the *Great Learning* and those of the Four-Sentence Teaching are virtually the same. It should also be noted that historically the formulation of the Four-Sentence Teaching occurred within months of Yang-ming's *Inquiry into the Great Learning* (*Ta-bsüeh wen* 大學問);³ this further suggests that there must be a close affinity between them.

To put the discussion in its original context, it is essential that we focus more sharply on Lung-hsi's interpretive position. The following quotation seems particularly relevant:

The Master [Yang-ming] sets up his teaching in response to contingent situations. This is called expedience (*ch'üan-fa* 權法). We must not be attached to its fixed formulation. Substance, function, manifestation, and subtlety are the same incipience (*chi* 機). The mind, the intention, *liang-chib*, and the thing are all one event. If we realize that the mind is the mind without good and evil, then the intention is the intention without good and evil, the knowing [of *liang-chib*] is the knowing without good and evil, and the thing is the thing without good and evil. For the mind without mindfulness is concealed in profundity, the intention without intentness is round and perfect in its response, the knowing without knowledge is tranquil in its substance, and the thing without thingness is unfathomable in its function.⁴

³ According to Ch'ien Te-hung's preface to the *Great Learning*, it was recorded by Yang-ming at the request of his students prior to his departure for the military campaign in Ssu-T'ien. Since the imperial order arrived in the fifth month of 1527 and Yang-ming embarked on the journey in the ninth month of the same year, it must have occurred within months of the historical debate on the Four-Sentence Teaching. See his *Nien-p'u* 年譜, in *Yang-ming ch'üan-shu* 陽明全書 (*ssu-pu pei-yao* 四部備要), 34: 16b–18b.

⁴ *Wang Lung-bsi yü-lu* 王龍溪語錄 (reprint; Taipei: Kuang-wen 廣文 Book Co., 1960), 1:1a.

Lung-hsi's argument can be understood through an inquiry into the mind-in-itself. If we take the concept of mind as our point of departure, we are bound to have some definite ideas about the meanings of intention, *liang-chih*, and thing. The term *hsin-chih-t'i* 心之體 is often rendered as "the substance of the mind." Professor Mou Tsung-san 牟宗三 of New Asia College suggests that it is better translated as "mind-in-itself."⁵ The reason should become clear later.

To say that the mind-in-itself is beyond good and evil is to maintain that concepts such as good and evil are simply inapplicable to the "reality" of the mind because as such the mind cannot be differentiated into discrete entities and then subsumed under a relative category. It is certainly legitimate, and not only in the tradition of Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130–1200), to describe the human mind (*jen-hsin* 人心) as laden with selfish desires and so dangerously prone to evil-doing, but to designate the mind-in-itself as either good or evil is to negate the basic assumption that it is "supremely good" (*chih-shan* 至善).⁶ To characterize supreme goodness as a form of good is to relativize an ultimate concept by a dichotomous scheme. This may not be as absurd as the idea of the "evil mind-in-itself" but it is equally misleading.

For the sake of expedience, we may define this approach to the mind as a "negative" method: clothing it in the state of nothingness. To say that the mind is being clothed in the state of nothingness is, however, not to suggest that the mind is being defined in terms of an ontological nonreality. The question whether the mind-in-itself is an ultimate reality or is, in the final analysis, a nonbeing should not concern us here. At issue is, given the transcendental nature of the mind-in-itself, what mode of comprehension is most suitable. Suppose the mind-in-itself is an ultimate reality rather than a non-being, does it necessarily follow that it is good, evil, or simply neutral?

⁵ Mou Tsung-san, "The Immediate Successor of Wang Yang-ming: Wang Lung-hsi and His Theory of *ssu-wu*," *Philosophy East and West*, XXIII, Nos. 1 and 2 (January and April, 1973), p. 104, note 2. For a more extensive analysis of the same issue, see his "*Wang-bsüeb ti fen-bua yü fa-chan* 王學的分化與發展," in *Hsin-ya Shu-yuan bsüeb-sbu nien-k'an* 新亞書院學術年刊, 14 (1972), pp. 93–94.

⁶ The term was actually used by Yang-ming himself; see *Cb'uan-hsi lu*, in *Tang-ming cb'üan-sbu*, 1:2b.

According to Lung-hsi's contention, which in this connection is in complete agreement with the first line of the Four-Sentence Teaching, it is senseless to describe the mind-in-itself in such terms; for as soon as this is done the mind-in-itself is inadequately understood as an empirical mind.

While the empirical mind manifests itself in concrete form, the mind-in-itself, as a substantial being, never manifests itself in concrete form. To the mind-in-itself, concrete forms are unnecessary attachments; they signify neither what it is nor how it really functions. It is in this sense that Lung-hsi defines the mind-in-itself as the mind that can manifest itself without the form of the mind. Of course *wu-hsin chib hsin* 無心之心 can be grammatically rendered as "the mind of no-mind."⁷ But it is vitally important to note that "no mind" here specifically refers to the ability of the mind to function without "mindful" traces of its functioning. Understandably such a mind is beyond the distinction of good and evil.

The mind-in-itself so perceived is, I believe, in perfect accord with the thrust of Yang-ming's other teachings. The Master once remarked:

However, if one does not realize that the mind-in-itself is devoid of all things [that is, completely pure and open], and focuses his mind solely on loving good and hating evil, he will merely add to his mind this much of his own intention and therefore his mind will not be broad and impartial. Only when one does not make any special effort whatsoever to like or dislike, as described in the *Book of History*, can the mind be in its original substance.⁸

There are other comparable examples in which the mind-in-itself is also approached by the Master in terms of the "negative" method. Yang-ming once used an analogy to illustrate his point. He stated that like the eye, the mind-in-itself is absolutely intolerant to the slightest presence of dust. It matters very little what the quality of the dust is. As gold dust is as dis-

⁷ The term has been rendered as "the mind of no-mind"; see Chang Chung-yuan, "The Essential Source of Identity" in Wang Lung-hsi's Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West*, XXIII, p. 37.

⁸ See Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living*, p. 77. Some changes have been made.

turbing to the eye as any kind of dust, so good and evil intentions are equally disturbing to the mind-in-itself.⁹ In short, Yang-ming maintains that the mind-in-itself is without any trace of good or evil. Only then can it be understood as “supremely good.”

Comparably *liang-chih* can also be understood as beyond good and evil. In Yang-ming's thinking, *liang-chih* is not only the ultimate ground of self-realization but also the primordial strength for self-cultivation. It is not simply knowing as a form of cognitive understanding but acting in the sense of experiential enlightening which necessarily brings about self-transformation at the deepest level. Knowing so conceived is certainly not restricted to empirical knowledge. It is not just to know an object, no matter how comprehensive the sensory perception is meant to be. To know an object presupposes a spatial distance between the knower and the object under investigation and a temporal gap between the commencement and the completion of the investigating procedure. It requires analytical methods and experimental skills. To be sure, it can also affect one's way of life. But the knowing of *liang-chih* is in itself a creative act. It is the basis upon which genuine action can be completed. Similarly, acting in this connection is not merely praxis. It is neither the practice of an external art nor the conduct of an acquired habit. The acting of *liang-chih* necessarily involves a profound self-awareness. For only with it can true intellectual self-definition be realized. The unity of knowing and acting is a defining characteristic of *liang-chih*.

This leads us to the corollary that *liang-chih* is both a substantial being and a transforming activity. It is on the one hand the innermost core of sensibility and on the other the most profound source of strength for self-cultivation. Far from being an external, abstract idea, it manifests itself as an internal, concrete reality, indeed as the center of creativity. To be sure *liang-chih* is not separate from sensory perceptions, but neither can it be fully appreciated in terms of ordinary experiences alone. Its “integrity,” so to speak, can never be reduced to what the Neo-Confucian scholars called “the knowledge of hearing and seeing.” It is probably in this sense that Yang-ming characterized *liang-chih* as “the refined spirituality of creative transformation” (*tsao-hua chih ching-*

⁹ See *Cb'uan-hsi lu*, 3: 26a.

ling 造化之精靈).¹⁰ Actually, *liang-chib* is not only an anthropological concept, restricted to the definition of human beings; it is the ultimate reality of the myriad things (*wan-wu* 萬物) as well. Indeed, *liang-chib* makes it possible for heaven and earth to become intelligible and meaningful processes of existence. Accordingly *liang-chib* was designated by Yang-ming as the “original substance” (*pen-t’i* 本體) of the mind; it is, in the last analysis, a different mode of expressing the mind-in-itself. Understandably *liang-chib* must not be conceived as either good or evil, for like the mind-in-itself it is supremely good.

If the mind-in-itself is beyond good and evil, how can intention be considered as having good and evil? In what sense is Lung-hsi justified in claiming that “if we realize that the mind is the mind without good and evil, then the intention is the intention without good and evil”? The underlying question is of course that of the relationship between the mind and intention. One way of answering the question is to define intention as the directionality of the mind. Intention so defined is an activation pointing toward a concrete manifestation of the mind. The inseparableness of intention and the mind thus resembles that of waves and the ocean. If the ocean is beyond good and evil, it seems quite misleading to suggest that the waves themselves, as natural activities of the ocean, are either good or evil. Thus intention is, like the mind-in-itself, also a transcendental concept, and Lung-hsi is therefore justified in asserting that intention is neither good nor evil. Correspondingly, if *liang-chib* is beyond good and evil, how can the thing be considered as having good and evil? This raises the question of the specific relationship between the thing and *liang-chib*. If the thing originates from *liang-chib*, it is inconceivable that the thing of *liang-chib* is not also supremely good. This line of reasoning seems in perfect accord with Yang-ming’s teaching.

In fact Yang-ming often conceptualizes a thing in terms of the self-expression of *liang-chib*. Comparable to the inseparability of the mind-in-itself and its intention, the thing as a concrete manifestation of *liang-chib* is necessarily an integral part of *liang-chib*’s self-definition. As a result, Lung-hsi’s insistence that if we realize that the mind is the mind without good and evil, then the thing is the thing without good and evil is not at all in conflict with what the Master

¹⁰ The same term is translated by Wing-tsit Chan as “the spirit of creation.” See *ibid.*, p. 216, and *Ch’uan-hsi lu*, 3: 26a-b.

himself clearly advocates. The following formulation by Yang-ming is singularly pertinent:

Principle (*li* 理) is one and no more. In terms of its condensation and concentration [in the individual] it is called the nature (*hsing* 性). In terms of the master of this condensation and concentration it is called the mind. In terms of the manifestation and activation of this master it is called the intention. In terms of the enlightening awareness of this manifestation and activation it is called knowledge. In terms of the affection and response of this enlightening awareness it is called the thing.¹¹

The whole discussion here is obviously at the transcendental level. In the light of Lung-hsi's insights, it can be easily argued that the mind without the forms of mind signifies the manner in which the mind masters human nature; it is precisely because the condensed and concentrated principle is deeply preserved in human nature that the mind can be said to have been "concealed in profundity." Similarly, the intention without the form of intention signifies the manner in which the intention manifests and activates the mind; since the intention, like the waves of the ocean, emerges naturally as the inner demand of the mind itself, its response can be said to be "round and perfect." Knowing without the form of knowing thus signifies the manner in which intention becomes acutely aware of its own orientation; if intention is understood as the directionality of the mind, knowledge pertaining to the self-awareness of the mind can therefore be described as "tranquil in itself." Accordingly, the thing without the form of thing signifies the manner in which *liang-chih* acts in concrete situations; not being a fixed object, the thing as the affection of *liang-chih* is indeed "unfathomable in its function."

Lung-hsi's approach to the Four-Sentence Teaching has been characterized as "fourfold nothingness" (*ssu-wu* 四無). In other words, the four root concepts are all perceived as in a state of nothing. It is vitally important to note that the term "nothing" in this particular connection is functionally defined. It actually means, in a transcendental sense, that mind-in-itself, *liang-chih*, inten-

¹¹ See Yang-ming's letter in reply to Lo Cheng-an 羅整菴, in *Ch'uan-hsi lu*, 2:28a. Cf. Chan's translation, *ibid.*, p. 161.

tion, and thing are all freed from attachments. The cultivation of the mind can be fully realized only when the effort is not being “mindfully” attached. Likewise, the intention is truly genuine when it is manifested as if with no intentness. Just as the most profound knowing has no trace of knowledge, the perfect thing completely delivers itself from thingness.

However, a crucial distinction must be made. While the mind-in-itself and *liang-chih* are absolutely beyond good and evil, the intention and the thing can very well be analyzed in terms of good and evil. Although it makes sense to say that the intention of the mind-in-itself and the thing of *liang-chih* are supremely good, it is difficult to maintain that intentions and things are always beyond good and evil. Even in a state of nothing, the level at which the mind-in-itself transcends mindfulness is fundamentally different from the level at which the intention is said to be without intentness. Correspondingly, the “unknowingness” of *liang-chih* in no way resembles the “nothingness” of the thing. While *liang-chih* always knows without the form of knowledge, only when the thing is conceived as the affection of *liang-chih* can it be characterized as a thing without thingness.

In the actual process of self-cultivation, however, the thing is often perceived as an intended object, locatable in a concrete situation. It is neither contentless nor formless. The tangibility of a thing is so central to self-cultivation that to deny it is to undermine the very basis upon which the conscious effort of self-cultivation is focused. In this context, to deprive a thing of its thingness, as it were, is tantamount to relinquishing the whole enterprise of self-cultivation.

This brings us back to the basic question, “What is a thing?” If it is conceptualized as an inseparable manifestation of *liang-chih*, it can very well be conceived as a kind of “transcendental affection,” completely beyond the dichotomy of good and evil. As a transcendental affection, the thing is, in the last analysis, without thingness. How, then, can the effort of rectification be applied? To rectify a thing certainly does not mean to “rectify” the transcendental affection of *liang-chih*. It is neither desirable nor possible to exert moral effort upon *liang-chih* itself. To be sure, *liang-chih* can and should be “extended” (*chih* 致), which in essence implies a process of self-manifestation. But it is misleading to suggest that the extension or manifestation of *liang-chih* must also be subjected to a rectifying procedure.

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However, if the thing is conceptualized as an intended object, it cannot avoid the judgments of good and evil. Nor can it be exempted from any moral scrutiny. It is in this sense that the effort of self-cultivation, known as the rectification of things, becomes relevant. From this perspective, *liang-chih*, which functions as the basis for rectifying the mind's intended objects, must itself make clear differentiations between right and wrong. The thing which needs to be rectified inevitably has the form of a thing; and the *liang-chih* which evaluates human affairs cannot eliminate the form of knowledge. Thus, in a state of being, neither the thing nor *liang-chih* is beyond good and evil. For both of them are "located" in concrete relationships.

Analogously, when the intention is conceptualized as the directionality of the mind-in-itself, it is inconceivable that it can be further refined. Indeed, how can the effort of making the intention genuine be applied, if the intention in question is, in the last analysis, without intentness? However, if intention is thought to be aroused by an object, it becomes imperative that the aroused intention be judged in reference to its intended object. Self-cultivation, as the effort of making the will (intention) sincere, immediately becomes pertinent. To make the intention sincere is to exert conscious effort whereby the intention can eventually become truthful to the original substance of the mind. From this perspective, the mind itself is not necessarily devoid of good and evil either. The mind with the form of the mind must choose to ally with the good so that the intention, despite its attachment to the thing, can remain sincere, truthful and genuine.

In contrast with the fourfold nothingness, this approach to the Four-Sentence Teaching is known as the "fourfold beingness" (*ssu-yu* 四有). In other words, the four root concepts are all perceived as in a state of being. Since the thing, having a concrete structure of its own, is not necessarily in the right place, it has to be rectified. Moral effort is then the prerequisite for "removing evil and doing good" so that the intended object can be properly situated. This is predicated on the ability of *liang-chih* to differentiate good from evil. Having the form of knowing, *liang-chih* is itself inevitably fixed in a definite function. If we pursue this line of inquiry, as soon as the intention is activated, good or evil unavoidably comes into being. Despite the assertion that the mind-in-itself is supremely good, so far as actual moral practice is concerned, the mind also needs to be constantly "cultivated."

If we commence self-cultivation by the rectification of things, we can conceptualize the Four-Sentence Teaching as a process toward a deepened subjectivity. The first step, from the rectification of things to *liang-chih*, is to synthesize discrete events of self-cultivation in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the “intellectual intuition” upon which all moral efforts are based. Next, while *liang-chih* as a form of knowing is a reflection on accomplished facts, the intention signifies an incipient tendency toward a concrete action. To be aware of the good and evil inherent in the activation of the intention is therefore a more subtle mode of self-cultivation. Finally, it is the “substance” of the mind that ultimately determines the quality of one’s being. Unless moral effort can eventually penetrate, so to speak, the deepest layer of human sensitivity, self-cultivation is still incomplete. Since, in a practical sense, there is always latitude for a further refinement of one’s inner sensitivity, the process toward an ever deepened subjectivity is therefore unceasing.

Does this emphasis on self-cultivation as a lifelong commitment signify a gradual, piecemeal teaching on enlightenment? The answer must be in the negative. For the ultimate ground as well as the actual faculty of self-cultivation is *liang-chih*. If self-cultivation commences with the rectification of things, it is because *liang-chih* by knowing good and evil can exert moral effort to do good and remove evil. There is neither external principle to guide nor outside power to initiate moral practice. Both the ontological basis and the real strength of self-cultivation are inherent in *liang-chih*. Furthermore, if self-cultivation commences with the activation of intention, the ultimate ground and the actual faculty of making the intention genuine are both located in the mind-in-itself. Indeed, the only possibility of asserting moral effort to redirect the incipient tendency of the intention is by the self-awakening of the mind. Without this, the intention as it is activated by the thing will escape the moral scrutiny of one’s inner sensibility. As a result, the intention is no longer a genuine expression of the mind but an attachment to an external object.

The Four-Sentence Teaching so conceived can thus be interpreted as indicating two parallel processes: (1) from the thing to *liang-chih*, and (2) from the intention to the mind-in-itself. In either case, the central concern is sharply focused upon the subtle manifestations of the mind. It is in this sense that to rectify things, to extend *liang-chih*, and to make the intention genuine are all modes of cultivating the mind. In Yang-ming’s own expression, this is an

attempt at “pulling up the root and stopping up the source” (*pa-pen sai-yuan* 拔本塞源).¹² If we take this approach seriously, Lung-hsi's critique of the so-called fourfold beingness becomes readily comprehensible:

The nature ordained by heaven is purely and supremely good. Wonderfully affecting and responding, its incipient manifestation is naturally unceasing. There is no good to be named. Of course there is originally no evil, but even good cannot dwell in it. Therefore it is called beyond good and evil. If there is either good or evil, it is because the intention is activated by the thing. Without being a “self-so flow” (*tzu-jan liu-hsing* 自然流行), it becomes attached to a state of being. That which is “self-so flow” moves without motion. That which is attached to a state of being moves with motion. Intention is what the mind manifests. If the intention is the intention of good and evil, *liang-chih* and the thing are simultaneously in the state of being. Neither can the mind be said to be in the state of nothing.¹³

It should be pointed out that Yang-ming himself has made similar claims: “The state of having neither good nor evil is that of principle in tranquillity. Good and evil appear when the vital force (*ch'i* 氣) is perturbed. If the vital force is not perturbed, there is neither good nor evil, and this is called the supremely good.”¹⁴ An exceedingly interesting exchange between Yang-ming and Lung-hsi recorded by Ch'ien Te-hung further illustrates that this must have been a position on which both were agreed:

Our Teacher had already embarked on his journey of military campaign to Ssu-en and T'ien-chou. Ju-chung 汝中 (the courtesy name of Lung-hsi) and I [Ch'ien Te-hung] followed after him and finally bid him farewell at Yen-t'an. Ju-chung raised the question of the Buddhist teaching on the reality and illusion of dharma. The Teacher said, “With the mind, all is reality (*shih* 實); without the mind, all is

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³ This is actually a continuation of Lung-hsi's statement mentioned in note 4. See *Wang Lung-hsi yü-lu*, I:1a-b.

¹⁴ *Ch'uan-hsi lu*, I:22a. See Chan's translation in *Instruction for Practical Living*, pp. 63-64.

illusion (*huan* 幻). With the mind, all is illusion; without the mind, all is reality.” Ju-chung remarked, “‘With the mind, all is reality; without the mind, all is illusion’ refers to conscious effort (*kung-fu* 工夫) from the viewpoint of original substance (*pen-t’i* 本體). ‘With the mind, all is illusion; without the mind, all is reality’ refers to original substance from the viewpoint of conscious effort.” The Teacher approved his interpretation. At the time I was not yet able to comprehend its meaning. After several years of endeavor, I have now come to the belief that original substance and conscious effort are one. However, our Teacher uttered those words at that time incidentally in answer to a question. There is no need for us Confucians in our instructional efforts to formulate our doctrines by relying upon this [Buddhist insight].¹⁵

Lung-hsi’s perceptive grasp of Yang-ming’s insight is really phenomenal. The remarkable rapport between them, which is also borne out by numerous other examples in the *Instructions for Practical Living* (*Ch’üan-hsi lu* 傳習錄), seems somewhat beyond the comprehension of even Ch’ien Te-hung, one of Yang-ming’s most trusted and respected disciples. To be sure, what Yang-ming and Lung-hsi both shared as an inner experience was the absolute unity of original substance and conscious effort. But the unity can be perceived from two significantly different viewpoints. If self-cultivation commences with the mind-in-itself, original substance entails conscious effort. This is known as a form of *a priori* learning (*hsien-t’ien chih hsüeh* 先天之學). For the “rectification” of the mind, as a holistic attempt at sudden enlightenment, is not empirically definable. The concept of rectification in this connection is fundamentally

¹⁵ *Ch’üan-hsi lu*, 3:26b. Cf. Chan’s translation in *Instruction for Practical Living*, p. 258. In Lung-hsi’s biography, the following statement is recorded in reference to this particular exchange:

The mind is neither being nor nonbeing; dharmas are neither real nor illusory. As soon as one is attached to being, nonbeing, reality, or illusion, one has already fallen into the trap of a “fragmented routine” (*tuan-ch’ang* 斷常). This is like juggling with balls. They are neither attached nor departed from any one place. Therefore it is called the “primordial unity” (*yuan-t’ung* 元同).

See “Wang Lung-hsi hsien-sheng chuan 王龍溪先生傳,” in *Wang Lung-hsi yü-lu*, p.1.

different from that in the “rectification of things.” To rectify a thing is to exert conscious effort upon an intended object, but to “rectify” the mind is simply to manifest the original substance of it. Since the mind, as the innermost subjectivity, can never be “rectified” as an object, the rectification of the mind actually means the self-awakening of the mind. Once the mind-in-itself is fully awakened, the intention becomes a “self-so flow” and the thing, as where the intention dwells, becomes properly situated. This certainly is not empirical learning; in a strict sense, it is not even learnable. “With the mind, all is reality; without the mind all is illusion” thus signifies the self-awakening of the mind.

On the other hand, if self-cultivation commences with the intention, conscious effort is an indispensable but not a sufficient ground for recovering the original substance of the mind. This is known as a form of *a posteriori* learning (*hou-t'ien chih hsüeh* 後天之學). For the intention, as activated by the thing, must be made sincere by empirically verifiable moral decisions. As Lung-hsi has pointed out, when the intention is no longer a “self-so flow,” it becomes attached to a state of being. As a result, it cannot transcend the dichotomy of good and evil. Moral decisions are thus required to free the intention from being fixed in the thing; only then can it again become a genuine manifestation of the mind-in-itself. This necessitates efforts such as the rectification of things. Actually doing good and removing evil is a concrete way of making the intention sincere. In a deeper sense, however, unless the mind is “rectified,” there is no assurance that the intention can remain sincere. To say that sincerity of the intention is dependent upon the rectification of the mind implies that moral efforts can be exerted upon the mind. On the surface, this seems diametrically opposed to our previous assertion that the mind can never be rectified as an object. To be sure, in *a priori* learning, it is meaningless to speak of the rectification of the mind. But in *a posteriori* learning, since the mind is in a state of being, it cannot be devoid of forms. In fact, that which is being rectified is not the mind-in-itself but the form of the mind. “With the mind, all is illusion; without the mind, all is reality” thus signifies the conscious attempt of the mind to liberate itself from its own form.

Of course, Lung-hsi was disposed to practice *a priori* learning. He strongly believed that the ultimate meaning of the Four-Sentence Teaching is to be sought in the mind without the form of the mind. Indeed, the mind but not

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the mind of mindfulness is the mind-in-itself. This comes close to the idea that “*prajñā* but not *prajñā* is called *prajñā*.” It may not be farfetched to suggest that Lung-hsi, through an experiential understanding of his Master’s spiritual orientation, was able to push Yang-ming’s Four-Sentence Teaching to its logical conclusion. It should be noted that Yang-ming himself fully endorsed Lung-hsi’s interpretation, although he still insisted upon the validity of the four axioms in their original formulation. It seems also that Yang-ming was quite aware of the Buddhist implications of Lung-hsi’s attempt to put the four root concepts in a state of nothing. Yang-ming’s willingness to answer Lung-hsi’s questions about the reality or illusion of dharma and the manner in which he actually dealt with the issue further indicate that he was not at all reluctant to confront Buddhist ideas. Indeed, Yang-ming seems to have taken a great delight in formulating religio-philosophical insights in Buddhist terminology.

Therefore I would not object to the assertion that Yang-ming, despite his early intellectual self-definition as a Confucian, was throughout his life deeply inspired by Buddhist ideas. His Four-Sentence Teaching and many of his encounters with Lung-hsi point to a dimension of his religio-philosophy which can well be explored in the context of Ch’an. Nor would I insist upon calling Lung-hsi a “Confucian,” simply because he was truthful to Yang-ming’s spiritual orientation. Although I cannot be certain that Lung-hsi’s “Ch’an-like” wisdom was necessarily a reflection of his specific predilection for Buddhism, I am absolutely sure that he, like his Master, never felt at home with the scholar-officials in Ming society who jealously defended the Confucian Tao against Buddhist heterodoxy for the wrong reasons. Ch’ien Te-hung was obviously concerned about Confucian appropriation of Buddhist insights. Had he mastered the drift of Yang-ming’s teaching as perceptively as Lung-hsi, he might have enthusiastically lent himself to such a creative adaptation.

Note: A very vivid account of the original controversy over the Four-Sentence Teaching is found in the *Instruction for Practical Living* (*Ch’üan-hsi lu* 傳習錄) recorded by Ch’ien Te-hung. Since the main focus of my analysis in the present study is on the interpretive position of Wang Lung-hsi, it seems appropriate to quote in full what Ch’ien believed to have

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transpired in the discussion. The following translation is taken from Professor Wing-tsit Chan's pioneering work:

In the ninth month of the sixth year of Chia-ching [1527] our Teacher had been called from retirement and appointed to subdue once more the rebellion in Ssu-en and T'ien-chou [when the earlier expedition under another official had failed]. As he was about to start, Ju-chung [Wang Chi] and I [Ch'ien Te-hung] discussed learning. He repeated the words of the Teacher's instructions as follows:

"In the original substance of the mind there is no distinction of good and evil.

When the will becomes active, however, such distinction exists.

The faculty of innate knowledge is to know good and evil.

The investigation of things is to do good and remove evil."

I asked, "What do you think this means?"

Ju-chung said, "This is perhaps not the final conclusion. If we say that in the original substance of the mind there is no distinction between good and evil, then there must be no such distinction in the will, in knowledge, and in things. If we say that there is a distinction between good and evil in the will, then in the final analysis there must also be such a distinction in the substance of the mind."

I said, "The substance of the mind is the nature endowed in us by Heaven, and is originally neither good nor evil. But because we have a mind dominated by habits, we see in our thoughts a distinction between good and evil. The work of the investigation of things, the extension of knowledge, the sincerity of the will, the rectification of the mind, and the cultivation of the personal life is aimed precisely at recovering that original nature and substance. If there were no good or evil to start with, what would be the necessity of such effort?"

That evening we sat down beside the Teacher at the T'ien-ch'üan Bridge. Each stated his view and asked to be corrected. The Teacher said, "I am going to leave now. I wanted to have you come and talk this matter through. You two gentlemen complement each other very well, and should not hold on to one side. Here I deal with two types of people. The man of sharp intelligence apprehends straight from the source. The original substance of the human mind is in fact crystal-clear without any impediment and is the equilibrium before the feelings are aroused. The man of sharp intelligence has accomplished his task as soon as he has apprehended the original substance, penetrating the self, other people, and things internal and things external all at the same time. On the other hand, there are inevitably those whose minds are dominated by habits so that the original substance of the mind is obstructed. I therefore teach them definitely and sincerely to do good and remove evil in their will and thoughts. When they become expert at the task and the impurities of the mind are completely eliminated, the original substance of the mind will become wholly clear. Ju-chung's view is the one I use in dealing with the man of sharp intelligence. Te-hung's view is for the second type. If you two gentlemen use your

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views interchangeably, you will be able to lead all people—of the highest, average, and lowest intelligence—to the truth. If each of you holds on to one side, right here you will err in handling properly the different types of man and each in his own way will fail to understand fully the substance of the Way.”

After a while he said again, “From now on whenever you discuss learning with friends be sure not to lose sight of my basic purpose.

In the original substance of the mind there is no distinction of good and evil.

When the will becomes active, however, such distinction exists.

The faculty of innate knowledge is to know good and evil.

The investigation of things is to do good and remove evil.

Just keep to these words of mine and instruct people according to their types, and there will not be any defect. This is indeed a task that penetrates both the higher and the lower levels. It is not easy to find people of sharp intelligence in the world. Even Yen Hui and Ming-tao [Ch’eng Hao] dared not assume that they could fully realize the original substance of the mind as soon as they apprehended the task. How can we lightly expect this from people? People’s minds are dominated by habits. If we do not teach them concretely and sincerely to devote themselves to the task of doing good and removing evil right in their innate knowledge rather than merely imagining an original substance in a vacuum, all that they do will not be genuine and they will do no more than cultivate a mind of vacuity and quietness.* This defect is not a small matter and must be exposed as early as possible.” On that day both Ju-chung and I attained some enlightenment.

See Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 243–245. It should be noted that for reasons of internal consistency, the Four-Sentence Teaching is rendered differently in my presentation.

*Like that of the Buddhists and Taoists.