

WANG YANGMING

Conversations

Early Sixteenth Century

In 1520 I went to Qianzhou and saw Wang Yangming again. I told him that recently, although I was making a little headway in my studies, I was finding it hard to feel secure or happy. He responded, “The problem is that you go to your mind to seek Heavenly principles, a practice called obscuration by principle. There is a trick for what you want to do.”

“Please tell me what it is.”

“It is simply the extension of knowledge.”

“How does one do it?” I asked.

“Take your intuitive moral knowledge as your personal standard. If you think about something, you will know it is right if it is right, wrong if it is wrong. You cannot conceal anything from your intuitive moral knowledge. Just don’t try to deceive it. Honestly follow it in whatever you do. That way you will keep what is good and get rid of what is bad. . . .

Once when Wang Yuzhong, Zou Shouyi, and I were attending him, Wang Yangming said, “Each person has a sage inside of him or her, which he or she suppresses because of lack of confidence.” He then looked at Wang Yuzhong and said, “You have been a sage from the start.” Yuzhong rose and politely demurred. The teacher added, “This is something everyone has. Why should you demur?”

“I do not deserve your praise.”

“Everyone has this, so naturally you do. Why be so polite? Politeness is not appropriate here.” Yuzhong then accepted with a smile.

Wang Yangming carried the discussion further. “Intuitive moral knowledge exists in people. No mat-

ter what they do, they cannot destroy it. Even robbers know that they should not rob. If you call them robbers they are embarrassed.”

Wang Yuzhong said, “Material desires can obscure the intuitive moral knowledge in a person, but not make it disappear. It is like the clouds obscuring the sun. The sun is not lost.”

Wang Yangming said, “You are so smart. No one else sees it.”

A lower-ranking official, who had for a long time been listening to discussions of our teacher’s doctrines, once said, “His doctrines are excellent, but because I am so busy keeping records and taking care of legal cases, I cannot study them further.”

When Wang Yangming heard of his remark, he said to him, “When did I say you should abandon your records and legal cases to take up study? Since you have official duties, you should use them as a basis for your study. That is the true investigation of things. For instance, if you are questioning a plaintiff, you should not get angry because his answers are impolite or become pleased because he uses ingratiating language. You should not hate him for his efforts to go around you and purposely punish him. Nor should you bend your principles and forgive someone because he implores you. You should not dispose of a case quickly because your own affairs are too pressing, nor let other people’s criticisms or praise or plots influence your decision. These ways of responding are all selfish. All you need to know is in yourself. Carefully check for any sign that you are biased, for that would confuse your recognition of right and wrong. This is how to investigate things and extend knowledge. Real learning is to be found in every aspect of record keeping and legal cases. What is empty is study that is detached from things.”

Source: Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed. and trans., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 257–58.