

THE IDENTIFICATION OF MIND AND PRINCIPLE  
By Wang Yangming

**Introduction**

“Neo-Confucianism” is a general term used to refer to the renaissance of Confucianism during the Song dynasty following a long period in which Buddhism and Daoism had dominated the philosophical world of the Chinese and also to the various philosophical schools of thought that developed as a result of that renaissance. Neo-Confucianism had its roots in the late Tang, came to maturity in the Northern and Southern Song periods, and continued to develop in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. As a whole, Neo-Confucianism can best be understood as an intellectual reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy in which avowedly Confucian scholars incorporated Buddhist and Daoist concepts in order to produce a more sophisticated new Confucian metaphysics.

As Neo-Confucianism developed, two trends of thought emerged out of the Southern Song philosopher and official Zhu Xi’s synthesis of the “learning of Principle” and the “learning of the Mind and Heart.” Both trends agreed that all the myriad things of the universe are manifestations of a single “Principle” (*li*) and that this Principle is the essence of morality. By understanding the Principle that underlies the universe (just as Buddhists understood all things in the universe as manifestations of the single Buddha spirit), then, men may understand the moral principles that they must put into practice in order to achieve an ordered family, good government, and peace under heaven. The two trends of thought differed, however, on the way in which human beings are to understand Principle.

The thinking surrounding the “learning of the Mind and Heart” is most often identified with the Ming general and statesman Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Wang argued that inasmuch as every living thing is a manifestation of Principle, then one need not look outside oneself in order to understand Principle (and therefore morality): one should consult one’s own heart (or mind), wherein Principle surely lay. Since Principle is the basis of human nature, then it follows that anyone who understands his or her true nature understands the Principle of the universe. In the short passage below Wang discusses the Mind/Principle relationship.

**Selected Document with Questions**

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What Zhu Xi meant by the investigation of things is “to investigate the principle in things to the utmost as we come into contact with them.” To investigate the principle in things to the utmost, as we come into contact with them means to search in each individual thing for its so-called definite principle. It means further that the principle in each individual thing is to be sought with the mind, thus separating the mind and principle into two. To seek for principle in each

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individual thing is like looking for the principle of filiality in parents. If the principle of filiality is to be sought in parents, then is it actually in my own mind or is it in my parents? If it is actually in the person of my parents, is it true that as soon as parents pass away the mind will then lack the principle of filiality? When I see a child about to fall into a well [and have a feeling of commiseration], there must be the principle of commiseration. Is this principle of commiseration actually in the person of the child or is it in the innate knowledge of my mind? Perhaps one cannot follow the child into the well [to rescue it]. Perhaps one can rescue it by seizing it with the hand. All this involves principle. Is it really in the person of the child or does it emanate from the innate knowledge in my mind? What is true here is true of all things and events. From this we know the mistake of separating the mind and principle into two.

**Questions:**

1. Her, Wang Yangming suggests that Principle and the mind are one and distinguishes his thinking on this matter from that of Zhu Xi. What concrete practices would one undertake in order to understand Principle if one accepted Wang Yangming's argument that it is not separate from one's own mind?
2. Compare Wang Yangming's thinking on Principle with the ideas of the Chan school of Buddhism.
3. If principle is in the mind, where does one look for the criteria of moral behavior? What practical results would come from this?