

## The Greater Learning

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*[Translator's Comment: The Greater Learning is an ancient text that was originally just a chapter in a longer work, the Record of Rites. However, it began to circulate as an independent text, and became increasingly important among Neo-Confucians. The common view was that the Greater Learning consisted of a "Classic" section, which had been written by Kongzi (Confucius), and a "Commentary" on the Classic, which had been written by Kongzi's disciple Zengzi. Zhu Xi's commentary on the Greater Learning became the orthodox interpretation, although it was challenged by Wang Yangming in his "Questions on the Greater Learning." In the translation below, the original text of the Classic and Commentary is given in **boldface**, while Zhu Xi's commentary is given in normal font. All footnotes are by the translator, as are comments in italics.]*

### Zhu Xi's Preface

The book, the *Greater Learning*, is the method by which the ancient school of Greater Learning educated people.<sup>1</sup> From the time Heaven (first) sent down and gave birth to the people, it did not fail to give anyone a nature with benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom.

Nonetheless, their endowments of innate *qi* are sometimes unequal.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, some are unable to understand what their natures have and to bring them to completion. As soon as those who were intelligent and wise enough to be able to fathom their natures stood out among them, Heaven decreed that they were the rulers and teachers of countless millions, and made them rule over and educate others, so that they could revive their natures. This is the manner in which (the Five Emperors) Fu Xi, Shen Nong, the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun carried on for Heaven and established perfection. And the duty of the Minister of Education and the offices of the Director of

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<sup>1</sup> In modern Chinese, "Greater Learning" 大學 is the standard way to refer to a college or university.

Music were established from this. Then the standard provided by the glory of the Three Dynasties (the Xia, Shang and Zhou) gradually became complete.

So everywhere, from the King's palace, to the capitals of the states, on down to the smallest alleys there were schools. Eight years after birth, sons and younger brothers, from those of the King and Dukes on down to those of the commoners, entered the school of Lesser Learning, where they were educated about the disciplines of "sweeping and cleaning, responding and replying, entering and exiting" (*Analects* 19.12), as well as the adornments of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and arithmetic (which are called the "Six Arts").

When they were fifteen, then from the heir apparent of the Son of Heaven and his other sons, on to the legitimate sons of dukes, ministers, chief counselors, high officials along with all who were outstanding among the people, entered the school of Greater Learning, where they were educated about the Way of making full use of the Pattern, correcting the heart, cultivating oneself, and ruling others.<sup>2</sup> This was how the education of the schools, and the division between greater and lesser was divided.

So schools were widely established in this way, and the details of the sequence of the techniques of education were like this. And the manner in which they educated was always rooted in the personal practice of the people's ruler and the abundance of what his heart had obtained. It did not rely upon anything beyond the people's daily lives and relationships. Consequently, at that time, everyone learned, and what they learned was nothing other than understanding what their nature had inherently, and what they should do according to their personal responsibilities. Each strived to exert his utmost effort at this. This is the manner in which, during the time of the time of the ancient, former summit, there was glorious rule above, and fine customs below. And this is what later ages have been unable to attain to.

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## Classic Section

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<sup>2</sup> On fifteen as the age at which learners begin the Greater Learning, see *Analects* 2.4.

My (Zhu Xi's) masters the Chengs said, "The *Greater Learning* is a surviving book of the Kong family. It is the gateway by which those starting their learning enter into Virtue. That today we can see the sequence by which the ancients engaged in learning relies solely upon the survival of this volume, with the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* after it. Learners must learn beginning from this. Then they will come close to not making any mistakes."

**1. The Way of Greater Learning lies in enlightening one's enlightened Virtue, it lies in renewing the people, it lies in resting in the ultimate good.<sup>3</sup>**

"Greater Learning" is the learning of an adult. "Enlightened Virtue" is something people get from Heaven. It is receptive, spiritual and unclouded. It contains the entire Pattern so that it can respond to the myriad kinds of situations. However, owing to the restrictions (caused by) our endowments of *qi* and the obscurations of human desires, there are times when it is darkened. Nonetheless, the enlightenment of its root Substance is never extinguished. Hence, learners should follow its manifestations and thereupon enlighten it in order to return to its start (before it was embodied in *qi*). "Renewing" means stripping away what is old. This part means that, having already enlightened one's own enlightened Virtue, one should then extend it to reach others, making it so that they too have the wherewithal to get rid of impurities from their old contaminations. "Resting" has the meaning that one must arrive at this and not wander away. "Ultimate good" is the highest point of what should be so according to the Pattern of situations. This part means that "enlightening one's enlightened Virtue" and "renewing the people" should both rest in the point of ultimate goodness and not wander away. In general, one must have the wherewithal to fully fathom this Heavenly Pattern up to its highest point, and be without even a hair's breadth of the selfishness of human desires. These three are the main themes of Greater Learning.

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<sup>3</sup> The first phrase could be rendered freely but accurately as "The goals of higher education are...." Zhu Xi follows Cheng Yi in amending 親民, "being affectionate to the people," to 新民, "renewing the people." This is a plausible emendation, although Wang Yangming argues against it.

**2. When one understands rest, only then is one settled. When one is settled, only then is one able to be tranquil. When one is tranquil, only then is one able to be at peace. When one is at peace, only then is one able to ponder. When one ponders, only then is one able to get it.** "Rest" is the place

one ought to stop, which is just where the "ultimate good" lies. One "understands" it and then one's will has a "settled" direction. "Tranquil" means that one's heart does not move recklessly. "Peace" means that one is at peace where one dwells.<sup>4</sup> "Ponder" means to minutely examine when dealing with situations. "To get it" means to get the place where one rests (which is the highest good).

**3. Things have their roots and their branches. Situations have their endings and their beginnings. To understand what to put first and**

**last is to come close to the Way.** Enlightened Virtue is the root. Renewing the people is the branches. Understanding rest is the beginning. To be able to get it is the end. The root and the beginning are what to put first; the branches and the end are what to put last. This summarizes the meaning of the two previous verses.

**4. The ancients who desired (i) to enlighten the enlightened Virtue of the world would first (ii) rule their states. Those who desired to rule their states would first (iii) put their clans in order. Those who desired to put their clans in order would first (iv) cultivate their selves. Those who desired to cultivate their selves would first (v) correct their hearts. Those who desired to correct their hearts would first (vi) make their thoughts Genuine. Those who desired to make their thoughts genuine would first**

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Analects* 4.2: "Those who are not benevolent cannot long dwell in difficulty, nor can they long dwell in delight. But the benevolent are at peace in benevolence, and the wise crave benevolence." (Translating according to Zhu Xi's interpretation.)

**(vii) extend their understanding. Extending understanding lies in (viii)**

**attaining to things.**<sup>5</sup> i. "To enlighten the enlightened Virtue of the world" is to enable all the people of the world to enlighten their enlightened Virtue. v. The "heart" is what determines the self. vi. "Genuine" (誠) is genuine (實). "Thoughts" are the expressions of the heart. To make the expression's of one's heart genuine is to desire that one is unified with goodness and does not deceive oneself. vii. To extend one's understanding is to desire that one has completely fathomed what one understands. viii. "To attain to" is to reach. "Things" means situations (in general). To completely reach to the Pattern of things and affairs is to desire that there is nowhere in their farthest reaches one does not go to. These eight (enlightening the world, ruling the state, putting clans in order, cultivating the self, correcting the heart, making thoughts genuine, extending understanding and attaining to things) are the details of the Greater Learning.

**5. Only after (viii) things have been attained to does (vii) understanding reach the ultimate. Only after understanding has reached the ultimate (vi) are thoughts Genuine. Only after thoughts are Genuine (v) is the heart correct. Only after the heart is correct (iv) is the self cultivated. Only after the self is cultivated (iii) is the family put in order. Only after the family is put in order (ii) is the state well-ruled. Only after the state is well-ruled (i) is the world at peace.** (viii) "Things have been attained to" is for there to be nowhere in the

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<sup>5</sup> "Attaining to things" is awkward and vague in English, but the Chinese 格物 is equally awkward and vague. For this reason, commentators have interpreted it in many different ways. The ancient interpreter Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 said that it meant "to make things come," meaning that if one is fond of goodness, good things will come to one, while if one is fond of badness, bad things will come. Wang Yangming said that it meant "to correct things," meaning to make things as they should be. We shall see Zhu Xi's interpretation below in Commentary 5. Unfortunately, every major line of interpretation is defensible. (Hence, Nivison declared the phrase "a philologist's delight." See Nivison, "The Philosophy of Wang Yangming," in Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism* [Chicago: Open Court Press, 1993], p. 225.)

farthest reaches of the Pattern of things that one does not get to. (vii) "Understanding has reached the ultimate" is to have completely fathomed what one's heart understands. (vi) After understanding has been fathomed, then one's thoughts can succeed in becoming genuine. (v) After one's thoughts are genuine, then one's heart can succeed in becoming correct. Everything from "cultivating the self" and above (cultivating the self, correcting the heart, making thoughts Genuine, understanding reaching the ultimate, attaining to things) is the activity of "enlightening one's enlightened Virtue." Everything from putting the family in order and below (putting the family in order, ruling the state, bringing peace to the world) is the activity of "renewing the people." To attain to things and for understanding to reach the ultimate are understanding where to rest (verse 2). Everything from "thoughts are genuine" and below (thoughts are genuine, the heart is correct, the self is cultivated, the family is put in order, the state is well-ruled and the world is at peace) is all the sequence of getting the place where one rests (verse 2).

**6. From the Son of Heaven on down to the common people, all regarded cultivating the self as the root.** From "correct the heart" and above (attaining to things, understanding reaching the ultimate, making the thoughts Genuine, correcting the heart) is the manner in which one cultivates the self. From "put the clan in order" and below (putting the family in order, ruling the state, bringing peace to the world) is taking this and applying it. **7. For the root to be chaotic yet the branches to be well-ruled -- no. For what is increased to lessen and for what is lessened to increase -- such a thing has never happened.** The "root" means the self. "What is increased" means the family. These two verses (6, 7) summarize the meaning of the preceding two verses (4, 5).

The preceding Classic, in one chapter, is presumably a teaching by Kongzi that was passed down by (his disciple) Zengzi. The Commentary, in ten chapters, is the interpretation of Zengzi, recorded by his disciples. The old edition (as found in the *Record of Rites*) has many

errors and omissions. In the present version, I have followed what was established by Chengzi, as well as further investigation into the text, to divide it into the sequence that follows.

In general, the text of the Commentary comments on the Classic in a selective way that seems to lack any coherence. But the Pattern of the text is linked and interconnected like blood vessels. The deep and the shallow, the beginnings and the endings are subtle in the extreme. If one reads it to familiarity and savors it, one should eventually see this, without ever exhausting its significance.

### Commentary Section

*(Translator's Comment: Chapter I through Chapter IV, and Chapter VIII through Chapter X of the Commentary have been left out of this translation. Chapter I further discusses "enlightening one's enlightened Virtue." Chapter II discusses "renewing the people." Chapter III discusses "resting in the ultimate good." Chapter IV discusses the "roots" and "branches." Chapter VIII discusses "cultivating one's self" in connection with "putting one's clan in order." Chapter IX discusses "putting one's clan in order" in connection with "ruling one's state." Chapter X discusses "ruling one's state" in connection with "bringing peace to the world."<sup>6</sup>)*

### Chapter V

**1. This is what is meant by understanding the root.** Cheng Yi says that this (preceding verse) is an interpolation. **2. This is what is meant by the ultimate of understanding.** There was additional text preceding this verse that is now lost. This is only the summarizing phrase of the section.

The fifth chapter of the Commentary, which presumably explained the meanings of "attaining to things" and "extending understanding," is now lost. I (Zhu Xi) have taken the liberty of using the interpretation of Cheng Yi to supply it. He said that what is meant by "the extension

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<sup>6</sup> Complete translations may be found in Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh*, and Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. (Gardner's translation is much better, but Chan's is more readily available.)

of understanding lies in attaining to things" is that desiring to extend my understanding lies in encountering things and exhausting their Pattern. In general, the human heart is spiritual and never fails to have knowledge, while the things of the world never fail to have the Pattern. It is only because the Pattern is not yet exhausted that knowledge is not fully fathomed.

Consequently, at the beginning of education in the Greater Learning, the learner must be made to encounter the things of the world, and never fail to follow the Pattern that one already knows and further exhaust it, seeking to arrive at the farthest points. When one has exerted effort for a long time, one day, like something cracking open, one will understand in a manner that binds it together. Then there will be nothing one fails to get to, whether inner or outer, refined or coarse, and the complete Substance and great Function of our heart will never fail to be enlightened.

This is what is called "having attained to things." This is what is meant by the ultimate of understanding.

## **Chapter VI**

**1. What is meant by "making one's thoughts Genuine" is to let there be no self-deception. It is like hating a hateful odor, or loving a lovely sight.<sup>7</sup>**

**This is called being at ease with oneself. Hence, the gentleman must be**

**careful in his solitude.** "Making one's thoughts Genuine" is the chief step in self-

cultivation. "Self deception" is to know to do good in order to eschew the bad, yet the

expressions of the heart are not completely genuine. "At ease" is being happy and content.

"Solitude" is a place where others do not perceive you, and only you yourself perceive. This

verse means that those who desire to cultivate themselves, when they know to do good in order

to eschew the bad, then they should genuinely make an effort and forbid self-deception, making

their hatred of the (ethically) hateful be like their hating a hateful smell, and their loving what is

good like their loving a lovely sight. In these cases their concentration is very decisive, and they

must get what they are seeking in order to be happy and contented within themselves. They may

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase "a lovely sight" has the connotation of finding something sexually attractive.

not just act recklessly, and follow along with what is external. But their being genuine or not is, generally, something that others cannot perceive. They themselves alone perceive it. Hence, they must be attentive in regard to this in order to examine the most minute (tendencies toward genuineness or artificiality).

**2. The petty person, when he is alone and does what is not good, has nothing he will not do. Only when he sees a gentleman is he evasive, hiding what is not good, and making evident his good. But others look at oneself like they can see one's insides. So of what benefit is this? This is what is meant by "What is genuinely inside will take form outside." Hence, the gentleman must be watchful over his solitude.** This means that the petty person does what is not good in darkness, but in the light wishes to hide it. This is not a case of not understanding that one ought to do good and ought to eschew bad. It is just that one is incapable of genuinely making an effort to reach this. But although he desires to hide his badness, in the end he is unable to hide it. He desires to feign doing good, but in the end he is unable to feign it. Of what benefit is this? This is why the gentleman seriously guards against it, and why he must be attentive toward his solitude.

**3. Zengzi said, "What is seen by ten eyes, what is pointed at by ten hands – it is not important?"** It cites this in order to illuminate the meaning of the previous verse. It means that, even if one is in the midst of dark solitude, one cannot hide one's goodness or badness. This is fearful in the extreme.

**4. If one is wealthy, one's rooms will be beautiful. If one is virtuous, one's self will be beautiful. If one's heart is broad, one's body is comfortable. Hence, a gentleman must make his thoughts genuine.** This means that, if one is rich, then one is able to have beautiful rooms. If one has Virtue, then one is able to have a beautiful self. Hence, if one's heart is without shame, then it will be broad and at peace, and one's body will constantly be at ease. This is what it is like for Virtue to make the self beautiful.

In general, goodness being genuine inside and taking form outside is like this. Hence, he says this again in order to summarize it.

**The preceding is Chapter 6 of the Commentary. It explains "making one's thoughts Genuine."** The Classic says, "Those who desire to make their thoughts Genuine must first extend their understanding." But it also says, "Only after understanding has reached the ultimate are thoughts Genuine." If the enlightenment of the heart's Substance has not yet been fathomed, then there must be some expressions of this heart on which one is incapable of genuinely making an effort, so that one is reckless and deceives oneself. Nonetheless, one may already be enlightened, but not be attentive about this. Then one's enlightenment is still not something that one fully possesses, and one lacks the foundation for advancing in Virtue. Hence, the point of this chapter can be understood only as a continuation of the previous chapter. Only then will one be able to see the beginning and ending of making an effort. As this section explains, the sequence may not be disordered, and there may be no gaps in the achievements.<sup>8</sup>

## **Chapter 7**

**1. What is meant by "cultivating one's self lies in correcting one's heart" is that, if the heart is angry about something, it will not be correct;<sup>ii</sup> if one is frightened of something, then it will not be correct; if one likes something,**

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<sup>8</sup> So Zhu Xi identifies two separate steps in the process of self-cultivation. There is coming to understand the Pattern in things, and then there is being Genuine in regard to this understanding. In other words, one must understand what is good and what is bad (this is a matter of "attaining to things" and "extending understanding"), and *then* come to dislike what is bad as much as one dislikes a bad stench, and like what is good as much as one likes a lovely sight (this is a matter of "making one's thoughts Genuine"). Wang Yangming would later strongly object to this on the grounds that Zhu Xi had introduced a dangerous division in the process of self-cultivation. There are not two steps, Wang insists. Instead, there is a "unity of understanding and action" (知行合一).

**then it will not be correct; if one is anxious about something, then it will not be correct.** These four are all the Functions of the heart, which people may not lack . But as soon as one has them and is unable to examine them, then desires overwhelm the feelings, and the activities of the Function cannot fail to lose their correctness. **2. If the heart is not present, one looks but does not see, one listens but does not hear, one eats but does not appreciate the taste.** To the extent that the heart is not preserved, one lacks the wherewithal to examine one's self. Consequently, a gentleman must examine this and reverently make it upright. Only then will this heart constantly be preserved and there will be no respect in which one's self is not cultivated. **3. This is what is meant by "cultivating one's self lies in correcting one's heart."**

**The preceding is Chapter 7 of the Commentary. It explains correcting the heart and cultivating the self.** This also continues the previous chapter in order to set up the following chapters.

When thoughts are Genuine, then one truly lacks badness and genuinely has goodness. This is the manner in which one is able to preserve this heart in order to examine the self. Nonetheless, if one only knows to make the thoughts Genuine, but is unable to minutely examine whether this heart has been preserved or not, then one will lack the wherewithal to make what is within (oneself) upright and cultivate the self.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> One's 氣質 is the endowment of *qi* that one is born with. (I am indebted to Susan Blake for making me think more carefully about the meaning of this phrase.) Although Zhu Xi insists that all people are born with the same root nature, he allows that people are born with different qualities of *qi*. Some people's *qi* is innately prone to intelligence and enlightenment, while other people's *qi* is ignorant and darkened. However, everyone can, through effort, become good. For more on this point, see Zhu Xi's commentary on *Analects* 17.2.

<sup>ii</sup> Zhu Xi follows Chengzi in emending 身, "self," to 心, "heart." Without this emendation, this sentence would read "if the self is angry about something, it will not be correct," and the referent of "it" in the following sentences would also be "self." (The sense is not all that different for the two readings.)

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<sup>iii</sup> Zhu Xi comments, " From here on in, I regard the older arrangement of the text as correct," meaning that from this point on he follows the arrangement of the text as it was found in the *Record of Rites*.