

UNITED WISDOM

Confucian Self-Cultivation: Correcting an Action Without Replacing It with a Self-Image

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

A06 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *Inner cultivation*

Zhu Xi, his authored *Preface to the Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase*, the paragraph on an outward model and inward work; a short fragment from the English version in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. This is a separate preface, rather than the words of the classic *Great Learning*. The selection read.

What this article is about

Self-cultivation can readily be imagined as creating a worthier image of ourselves. Yet that image may improve while a particular action remains uncorrected. Confucian attention to our own work enables a narrower question: what did we actually do, what did we describe as done and which step is now available? The article distinguishes the classic *Great Learning* in James Legge's presentation from Zhu Xi's separately authored preface. They are not merged into one text or historical position. Their moral grounds are considered within the contexts read, without promising a measured psychological effect. The question is then brought into an explicitly hypothetical scene of a small promise to an acquaintance. Cultivation does not mean a demand to become immediately faultless; acknowledging error does not mean a right to demand another person's forgiveness. The transition from a convenient self-description to an available correction of a particular action matters, while preserving consent, limits and the unknown.

I. Self-cultivation has a subject in our own action

Suppose an acquaintance asks someone, during an agreed visit, to perform a small care task for two houseplants following instructions left for them. The visit takes place, but the guest forgets one part of the request. In a message they say everything is done, and only later notice the discrepancy. The scene is hypothetical; it gives no advice on plant care, access to another person's home or action in dangerous circumstances. Its subject is the difference between the agreed request, the part performed and a report of the result that exceeded the actual action.

The first difficulty now need not be how to obtain a more favourable view of ourselves. It is that another person received inaccurate information and may rely on it. This is a separate

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

subject for consideration. The guest may simultaneously value trust, feel ashamed of the mistake and want to appear attentive. But these feelings establish neither what happened to the plants, what the owner knows nor what action is now available. The limits of information need preserving before the event becomes a story about personal moral maturity or its complete absence.

Self-cultivation in this question concerns our own participation: what was promised, performed and communicated. It does not require immediately judging the whole person or explaining the acquaintance's character. One omission and one sentence can be considered. This limitation does not make the moral question trivial. It protects it from substitution: instead of correcting the report, someone might discuss at length how caring they are in general, leaving the recipient with the earlier inaccurate information. A grand word about cultivation does not itself change either the message or the action.

In the classic *Great Learning*, work on the self is placed at the foundation of other relationships. We retain this as a normative priority rather than a demonstrated law by which an internal change automatically repairs the entire world. In our application, that priority means beginning with our own available part. It permits neither appropriating every cause of the situation nor refusing to notice others' actions. Correction needs a definite subject precisely because a person possesses neither a relationship as a whole, the circumstances nor every possible consequence of their former message.

II. Sincerity is not exhausted by a convincing acknowledgment

The commentary to the *Great Learning* that we read connects sincerity of thought with an absence of self-deception and attention to ourselves without an audience. This is the text's moral language rather than an instruction to watch every inner movement constantly. We do not turn it into obligatory control of feelings or a demand to disclose an entire private life. The limited question is different: does our account of an action change when nobody checks it? Can an omission be called an omission even without an external witness who forces us to do so?

In the hypothetical scene, the guest knows they did not fulfil the entire request. Their report can be corrected without recounting every thought experienced. The performed part can be separated from the unperformed part, without inventing a condition that was not checked. Such a response may look less attractive than a long acknowledgment of responsibility. Yet the beauty of an acknowledgment is not its principal test. The recipient needs information about the present situation. If the acknowledgment leaves the earlier inaccuracy concealed, it may improve the speaker's image without securing even the report's limited truthfulness.

An acknowledgment may also immediately demand comfort. Someone reports a mistake in a manner requiring the other person at once to confirm their goodness and end any displeasure. The conversation's subject then changes again. Instead of clarification, the recipient is assigned work to preserve someone else's image. This does not prohibit feeling or requesting appropriate support. But support and correction of a message remain different actions. The acquaintance may hear the clarification without becoming solely responsible for the inner state of the person who previously sent an inaccurate answer.

Finally, sincerity cannot be established by a feeling's intensity alone. The guest may feel deeply while failing to communicate something significant. They may acknowledge the omission calmly and actually convey the necessary clarification. The article therefore does not assess moral quality through visible shame or tears. It asks what was communicated, on what grounds and which available step follows from the acknowledged mistake. Inner experience matters to the person, but does not replace information, consent and actions affecting another participant in the hypothetical agreement.

III. A model helps us consider a form without living in our place

In the preface read, Zhu Xi distinguishes an outward model from the detail of inward work. We do not accept his entire historical educational hierarchy as a contemporary norm. In particular, the account of an ideal ancient order and polemic against other teachings remain the author's position rather than the article's conclusion. A limited distinction matters here: seeing a worthy form of action and performing our own work are not the same event. A model may provide a question for consideration, but cannot itself confirm that a specific report has now become accurate.

Someone who appropriately acknowledged an error can be recalled. But copying their words cannot guarantee identical circumstances. Our scene has another subject, request and unknowns. An attractive ready-made phrase taken without examining its content may hide a significant omission. The model is therefore worth considering through its grounds: what in it supports truthfulness, respect for another person and accuracy of scope? These questions differ from wanting to reproduce an outward tone so that the listener must assess the speaker as mature and trustworthy.

The same limit applies to a mentor. Appropriate advice can be sought where that conversation is available, but advice does not transfer all responsibility for a report to the mentor. Information known to the participant needs preserving. Consent from the recipient cannot be attributed to an adviser, nor can the adviser be asked to invent a missing fact. The mentor may also be mistaken. Moral attention to a model therefore does not require unconditional obedience to every authoritative tone. Content, competence and the possibility of considering advice in relation to the present action matter.

A model may reveal a gap between intention and performance. Revealing it is not yet correction. Work remains afterwards: deciding what can be clarified, which consent is required and what cannot be promised. If someone merely states that they now understand the right principle, another person may continue acting on the earlier report. Inner understanding and outward correction thus remain connected without merging. An action cannot be declared complete just because its form became intelligible; nor must understanding be considered meaningless because not every correction is immediately available.

IV. Acknowledging our part creates no knowledge of the whole

The guest knows they forgot one part of the care task. It does not follow that they know the plants' entire present condition or every consequence of the omission. They can report their own action and identify the limits of information. Confidence that everything is surely fine need not be added when nobody has checked it. Nor should serious damage be asserted without grounds. Self-cultivation here requires accuracy of knowledge rather than the harshest account. Severity towards ourselves does not become truthfulness if it describes a supposition as a fact.

Clarification can separate several positions: the visit occurred, one agreed part was not performed, the former general answer was inaccurate and the current condition is unknown. Each has its grounds. They need not combine into one convenient assessment of the situation. The recipient can consider them from their side, perhaps holding additional information. The article proposes no ready-made report for every relationship. It preserves distinctions that prevent an omission from being hidden within a favourable general statement and prevent acknowledgment from expanding into invented complete responsibility for every possible outcome.

Nor must someone declare themselves the sole cause of another's inconvenience. If the time changed or some instructions were unclear, that may matter. Yet these circumstances need establishing rather than retrospectively appointing them an excuse. A personal omission can be acknowledged while another condition is separately checked. Neither erases the other. This separation differs from searching for someone to blame so discussion can end immediately. It retains the question of available correction and does not force participants to accept one general story merely for a convenient distribution of moral assessment.

If a serious threat, specialist care or a professional decision is involved, philosophical examination should remain within appropriate limits and suitable assistance be sought. Our small scene does not replace those actions. Even ordinary clarification may be unavailable in an unsuitable relationship. The exercise does not require obligatory contact. Honestly naming the boundary matters, rather than calling silence a completed report. An unavailable step

creates no right to invent its performance; it remains part of the present position, which may require another appropriate form of consideration.

V. Repetition of a form does not guarantee a changed action

Self-cultivation is often associated with regularity. Yet repeating a moral word and repeating a truthful action are different occupations. Someone may write every evening that they should be more attentive while continuing to send unconfirmed general answers. This alone does not make the note useless, but its actual role needs consideration. Which part of behaviour changed? Which decision does the participant now make before sending a report? We do not promise that a discovered form will become an enduring habit within a specified time or produce the same result for everyone.

In the hypothetical scene, a possible change is specific: distinguish the performed parts of a request before a future general answer. This is no obligatory system for every agreement. It concerns the error discovered: a general answer exceeded the action. If a new request differs in nature, another check may be needed. Self-cultivation cannot be reduced to an unchanging ritual to perform regardless of its subject. The question is whether the form fits the present action or has become a way to feel disciplined without noticing new significant conditions.

Repetition does not erase earlier consequences either. A more accurate answer in the next task does not automatically correct the former message to the acquaintance. Two times need distinguishing. Future practice can change while earlier inaccuracy remains uncorrected. A present report can be corrected while it remains unknown whether accuracy will be retained in another situation. These positions are compatible. Self-cultivation cannot be declared complete after one successful action; an actual correction cannot be dismissed merely because it did not establish a permanent personal quality for the rest of a life.

Moral work nevertheless must not become an endless report. Sometimes a small request needs only a limited check. Additional notes may no longer add information or change a decision. Someone may stop an unsuitable exercise, keep part of their reflection private or reduce the scope. This does not cancel the question of an actual communication if it remains significant. The form's boundary needs relating to the subject: avoid creating total self-observation, and avoid using refusal of it as grounds for leaving another person with a known inaccuracy.

VI. Relating to another person tests the limits of self-cultivation

After clarification, the acquaintance may remain displeased. This does not automatically mean the message was useless. Truthfulness and approval are different results. Correction allows consideration of present circumstances, but determines no particular feeling for the recipient. Someone can acknowledge their part without requiring immediate forgiveness. If moral work becomes a means of obtaining an obligatory favourable response, another person again becomes an instrument for confirming our image. Their own assessment and information lose their place in a conversation formally devoted to responsibility.

Conversely, another person's displeasure does not establish every demand as valid. The recipient may expand the original request or expect an unavailable action. That demand can be considered separately while acknowledgment of the initial omission remains. Accepting a specific mistake does not mean transferring to someone else the right to determine our entire future life. The article retains both limits. Personal responsibility remains visible, and new participation requires appropriateness, ability and consent. Refusing an excessive demand must not silently erase the established inaccuracy of an earlier report.

In the Confucian moral question, action is considered within relationships, but a relationship is not the participants' single consciousness. One may consider a correction sufficient while another sees remaining inconvenience. This difference is not always resolved immediately. A correction performed and the uncertainty remaining can both be named. Reconciliation that has not occurred need not be portrayed. Our editorial application does not derive contemporary reciprocity and consent entirely from the classic text's historical hierarchy. It identifies a separate limit: one person's self-cultivation gives them no power to determine another person's meaning of the event.

Sometimes the next step is consequently to hear specific additional information where conversation is appropriate and available. Sometimes it is agreeing a smaller scope for future requests. Sometimes cooperation ends. These options need not confirm a single ideal history of relationships. Correcting an action may be real without continuation of the former arrangement. Its reality is examined through what was actually done and communicated, rather than a claim that ending a relationship itself proves independence, maturity or the final victory of inward work.

VII. A tradition's authority does not replace reading distinctions

A classic text, its commentary and a separate preface are not one utterance. Calling everything Confucianism is insufficient to establish a particular thought's origin. In this article, the direct fragments belong specifically to Zhu Xi's authored preface. The classic *Great Learning* provides a limited basis for paraphrase. This distinction preserves the historical subject and prevents a later explanation being presented as the first layer's literal words. Another English version or website does not create a new independent work where the underlying text remains the same.

This accuracy concerns the question of self-cultivation itself. Someone saying they act according to a tradition should examine what was read and in what sense it is applied. Invoking a great authority cannot fill an unknown. A limited basis can be retained while personal reasoning is identified as an application. This does not make it less serious. The boundary allows the reader to examine the transition from a historical assertion to a contemporary scene, without treating a convenient analogy as a demonstrated law applying in every relationship regardless of conditions.

The preface read contains a polemical assessment of other teachings. The article does not accept it as a general verdict on Buddhism or Daoism and establishes no interreligious superiority. Acknowledging a position's origin means preserving its historical belonging, rather than undertaking to reproduce it in today's conversation. Our scene requires neither agreement among all traditions nor a claim that they all teach the same thing. A limited question about our own report can remain substantial without invented universality or introducing unread religious texts into a connections map.

Similarly, editorial application must not hide behind an ancient formula. We ask about consent, an unavailable request and another person's right not to forgive immediately in the present hypothetical scene. We do not claim the source read supplied a complete contemporary protocol. Readers may distinguish the source from the proposed reasoning, agree with part or refuse the exercise. This boundary supports independent reading. Authority helps make a question visible, but does not replace a person's decision or turn their own limit into evidence of moral inadequacy.

VIII. Personal judgment can remain open to examination

At the preface's conclusion, Zhu Xi identifies his own participation in work on the text and leaves it to subsequent judgment. We do not use this as proof that his edition contains no errors. The limited analogy instead concerns a distinction between offering work and declaring it unconditionally correct. In our case, someone may report that the known part was checked while retaining the possibility of correction when new information appears. Openness does not require abandoning every decision until universal agreement. It requires avoiding the presentation of present grounds as infallibility.

After correction, the guest may consider their report sufficiently accurate. But if the acquaintance identifies a specific remaining inaccuracy, its content needs consideration. Not every comment is correct; nor is every comment mistaken because correction has already occurred. The participant can ask which information differs and what each party knows. This examination keeps personal judgment active. It turns judgment neither into a final verdict inaccessible to others nor into an obligation to accept every external demand for the sake of appearing humble.

Openness also has resource limits. Someone need not discuss the same uncertainty endlessly without new information. The subject of a comment and the available scope of conversation can be clarified. If discussion becomes dangerous or unsuitable, the exercise does not require continuation. Ending it gives no right to declare every question resolved, however. Two different statements remain: conversation is not continuing now, and the current disagreement may remain. They are compatible. An accurate boundary matters more than a convenient description that stopping automatically established correctness or secured complete mutual understanding.

Examinability thus does not mean total dependence on assessment. It means room for a specific objection and change on grounds. Self-cultivation may involve personal decision, appropriate listening and refusal of an excessive demand. These actions cannot be replaced with a general posture of receptiveness. Someone can look attentive without changing any inaccurate information, or respond with restraint while actually making a necessary correction. The subject therefore matters again: which judgment was examined, what changed and what remains unknown after the present conversation?

IX. Correction has an actual boundary

Suppose clarification has been sent. This is an actual action, but does not yet confirm that the acquaintance read the message or that the omission's consequences have been removed. Sending, receiving, reaching a new agreement and possibly performing the remaining part need distinguishing. The article does not require confirmation of every stage in every situation. It requires avoiding the appropriation of an unknown stage as completed. Someone can honestly report what they did and retain a limit to verification. Moral language about correction adds no missing fact, even when the intention itself was serious.

If an additional visit is possible only with fresh consent, it cannot be called available before that consent. If a plant's condition is unknown, a specific outcome cannot be promised. If assistance is unavailable now, another appropriate step may be discussed, but ability cannot be invented for an attractive ending to the story. This remains reasoning about accurate participation rather than guidance on specialist care. Correction is limited by its subject and known conditions. It may be incomplete while someone retains responsibility for the part performed without promising removal of every possible inconvenience.

It may later emerge that no consequences occurred. This does not retrospectively make the former inaccurate message accurate. An inconvenience unknown to the guest may also emerge. It does not automatically prove that all their present words were lies. Information about time, action and the grounds of communication is required. Separating these questions keeps learning specific. Instead of a general story about good and bad people, the discrepancy's location, the step performed and the new part needing attention only now can be considered.

After an actual correction, the question may end within its present scope. An error need not be retained as a permanent sign of personal inadequacy. But completion must rest on available information rather than tiredness with discussion. Any remaining unknown can be identified. If an obligation was reconsidered, an actual agreement matters. Someone may return to other tasks without promising never to err again. Correcting a particular action and final perfection are different results; the first can be considered without a demand to prove the second.

X. Work on the self preserves dignity without substitution

In the question considered, self-cultivation does not require choosing between preserving dignity and acknowledging error. Our part can be acknowledged without turning it into a verdict on the entire person. Dignity can be retained without calling an unperformed action performed. Specific work remains between them: examine the report, separate knowledge from supposition, clarify an available action, hear new information and preserve a boundary. The sources provide moral grounds for asking the question; the contemporary hypothetical scene is no proof that an ancient order or one form of note suits everyone without exception.

Inward intention and outward correction must not displace each other. Someone may truly wish to change while retaining an uncorrected report. They may perform a correction without knowing how enduringly their future attentiveness will change. These distinctions avoid two extremes: awaiting complete inward perfection before available action, or declaring one external gesture final self-cultivation. Moral examination preserves continuity precisely because it does not require merging different stages into one favourable image that must subsequently be defended against every new piece of information.

The limited question therefore remains active: which personal action can now be named more accurately, and which correction is available? The answer may be small. It need not be decorated with a promise of universal harmony or guaranteed calm. If a step is unavailable, the boundary needs preserving; if performed, the part completed can be acknowledged. Another person remains an independent participant, rather than confirmation of our maturity. In this form, work on ourselves concerns the reality of action and relationship, leaving room to learn, change a decision and avoid reducing an entire life to one mistake.

What this means in practice

Where appropriate, choose one small report of your own about a voluntary task. Do not use a dangerous relationship, serious threat or work requiring specialist competence. The note can be skipped or stopped; private details need not be disclosed to others for the exercise.

Separate the part promised, what was actually performed and what was communicated. If a discrepancy emerges, identify it within known information. Do not add supposed consequences as established facts. Consider one available appropriate step: clarification, fresh agreement or acknowledgment of an absent ability. Contact with another person is not an unconditional requirement.

Check that correction assigns the recipient no duty immediately to comfort, forgive or confirm your maturity. Separately retain an unknown stage: was the message received, was the new condition accepted, was the next part performed? A narrow possible result is a more accurate

account of personal participation. Success, calm, forgiveness and enduring habit change are not guaranteed; appropriate support in a threat is not replaced with a philosophical exercise.

Key quotation

> *Await the judgment of later gentlemen*

Zhu Xi, his authored *Preface to the Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase*, the paragraph describing his collection, rearrangement and supplementation of the text, from *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. The short fragment proves no infallibility of the edition and is not the words of the classic *Great Learning*. The context read.

Connections between traditions

Question	Sources read	Comparison	Boundary
Work on the self and a report	Great Learning, main text and commentary on sincerity; hypothetical request	Our own part of an action is considered separately from a favourable image.	A normative basis and editorial application, rather than a demonstrated psychological mechanism.
Model and examinability	Zhu Xi's authored preface, paragraphs on inward work and its conclusion	An outward example and offering personal work are not its performance or infallibility.	A separate work; polemic and the ancient educational hierarchy are not accepted as a universal contemporary norm.

Historical borrowing, superiority over other religions and interreligious identity are not asserted. Unread traditions have not been added to the map.

Primary sources

1. **Zhu Xi. Authored Preface to the Great Learning by Chapter and Phrase /** 大學章句序. Columbia University, Asia for Educators selection; *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol.1, Columbia University Press, 1999, pp.722–725. Both displayed selections, questions and version information were read; this is not the entire Chinese commentary. Source. It states ©1999, reproduction by permission of the publisher and all rights reserved; an open licence and universal permission are unestablished. Only checked short fragments are used; full import and vectorisation are not authorised.

2. **Great Learning / Daxue.** James Legge, 1893 version, Sacred Texts. The entire displayed text and commentary were read; the article uses limited paraphrase of the main text and section on sincerity, without new direct quotations. Authorship and layers are not established by a website label alone. Text. The ancient text and old version have separate territorial rights boundaries; the website gives no grounds to declare the entire material open for every import.

Tags

Confucianism, Zhu Xi, Great Learning, self-cultivation, sincerity, self-deception, action, correction, report, promise, responsibility, model, mentor, self-image, dignity, knowledge, supposition, consent, boundary, relationships, practice, repetition, habit, examinability, judgment, reading, commentary, preface, moral philosophy, independence

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He researches inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.