

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

Volume 14, 2007

# The Ethics of Knowledge and Action in Postmodern Organizations

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# The Ethics of Knowledge and Action in Postmodern Organizations

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## **Abstract**

Good Corporate Governance was explicitly formulated in the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which became federal law in 2002. It includes ethical guidelines to regulate employee behavior and the interrelations between organizations and their shareholders. While these guidelines are exterior to the person, this paper discusses the construct of an internal beacon for right managerial action, in the Buddhist sense, as well as ways not only to access it mentally but also to extend it into the outside world. Within this perspective, it also presents the ethical teaching of the Chinese Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Although Wang is considered to be a Neo-Confucian philosopher, in this article he is considered a seminal thinker within the Chan Buddhist tradition Wang's method of self-cultivation is presented to access the person's innate knowledge which in itself implies right action.

## Introduction

The post-modern globalist business organization, as it is developing today, is characterized by fading boundaries. Physical boundaries, such as location and office space, temporal boundaries, such as working hours, and hierarchical and professional boundaries are rapidly disappearing. At the same time, public institutions, as classic representatives of ideology, of "objectively convincing absolutes...and of demonstrable certain supports" (Smith 1965:XIII) are gradually losing their roles. The contemporary Westerner, according to Smith (1965:XIII), has to walk on the sea of nothingness. What holds true for the West, however, is increasingly valid for the East; boundaries there are melting, too.

It seems to me that global business corporations are gradually taking over the function of the traditional representatives of public institutions and of their normative systems of ethics and values. Unfortunately, the CEOs and managers of these global organizations themselves are often rather insecure about those norms because in postmodern societies these institutions, constituted by religious and political ideologies, are no longer perceived by the general public as beacons to turn to for guidance and norms.

Evidently aware of this situation, the World Bank formulated the concept of *good governance* as a beacon on the "sea of nothingness." It emphasizes values such as transparency, responsibility, efficiency and the democratic participation in decision making. Corporate governance is about the interrelations between stakeholders and the goals of the organization. Employee behavior should thus be guided by trust, integrity, honesty,

openness, performance orientation, accountability, respect and commitment to the organization.

This concept of corporate governance has a number of weak points. First, these items may easily be used as mere lip service to generally, albeit superficially, accepted values. According to custom, each new employee has to declare his agreement to those values, implying that by his or her signature alone they indeed will serve as true directives. Second, these items are conceived as external rules to which one must conform. However, in the free market world, protests are already heard against formulating of ever more rules. More rules, it is said, tend to destroy creative entrepreneurship.

The most important objection, however, is that these items are external instead of internal beacons for *right action*, in the Buddhist sense. Because they stem from outside authorities, they are difficult to internalize and to integrate. On the other hand, do internal beacons exist at all? Where would they be located and how could they be activated and operationalized in one's day to day behavior-in-the-marketplace?

In this paper the construct of an *internal* beacon for right action will be discussed as well as ways not only to access it mentally but also to extend it into action vis-à-vis the outside world. Within this perspective, the ethical teaching of the Chinese Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (1472-1529) will be discussed because of his relevance to the topic. Though Wang is considered to be a Neo-Confucian Philosopher (Chan 1962; Henke 1964; Tu Wei-ming 1976:1976), in this article he is presented as a seminal thinker within the Chan Buddhist tradition.

First, I will describe Wang's life briefly, and then outline his doctrine, with special emphasis on his theory of the identity of knowledge and action. Subsequently, I will discuss his position within the Chan Buddhist tradition. Finally, I will highlight Wang Yangming's relevance for the postmodern organization and indicate how his doctrine might be applied practically in day to day managerial functioning.

### **The Life of Wang Yangming**

Born of noble descent in 1472, in a period of moral decay exemplified by the then corrupt morals of the Chinese Imperial Court, Wang received the name of *Wang Shouren* ("holding on to humanity") by a passing Buddhist monk, as the legend goes. Raised in the tradition of Confucian *literati*, (admiring) "the carefree Taoists and the detached Buddhists" (Tu Wei-ming 1976:28), and starting to write poetry, he involved himself deeply—cognitively as well as experientially—in the study of "the three religions," Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, spending months meditating in Buddhist monasteries, and practicing, in Daoist retreats, *daoyin*, the Daoist methods of breathing, dietary control and yoga-like exercises (Tu Wei-ming 1976:58). Eventually, predestined by his family tradition, he pursued a governmental career. When he defended two advisors of the Imperial Court, who had been falsely accused, he got into conflict with the high ranking eunuch Liu Jin. Wang had to suffer physical abuse in front of the emperor, and was then exiled to a distant mountain region. After Liu's death in 1510, Wang was rehabilitated and lead the life of a typical mandarin, his life itself becoming a metaphor for his teaching. Though he had a growing body of interested students around him, his doctrines where frowned upon by the official Confucian elite. Having become a general, he had to "pacify" the rebels in the Guanxi region. Instead of killing them, which would have been the custom, he

endowed them with the responsibility of keeping the province safe. On his way home he died in 1529. Fifty years later he was again rehabilitated by the Court, and by Imperial decree was declared a godlike being, to be venerated in a temple, next to Master Kong Fuzi.

### **Knowledge and Action**

In 15th century Ming dynasty, government circles officially claimed adherence to Confucian religion, historically based on the original teachings of Kong Zi (551-479 BCE) and of Meng Zi (372-289 BCE), but mainly inspired by the Neo-Confucian reformer Zhu Xi (1130-1200). The philosopher Zhu Xi, deeply rooted in Chinese pragmatic culture, was a realist: separate from the mind there exists an outside world of things. Things are knowable to the mind, and a deep study of investigating the world of things and of men eventually may lead to developing of a moral self, to self-knowledge and, finally, to sagehood. Zhu Xi thus positioned himself against orthodox Confucianism, which got bogged down in the formal performance of rituals and the mere memorizing, without internalizing, of the classical texts.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, he was a true moralist.

Being likewise a moralist at heart, Wang nonetheless fiercely opposed Zhu Xi. Against the realist he positioned himself as an idealist or rather as a constructivist philosopher. Wang's teaching represented a sort of Zen revolt within Confucianism (Fairbank and Reischauer 1979:92). While Zhu Xi held that knowledge could be extended by objective methods, Wang emphasized intuitive knowledge, through the investigation of one's inner by self cultivation. Man's knowledge is innate.<sup>2</sup> In an early poem (Ching 1976:164), Wang says:

In every man there is a (mariners) compass,

His mind-and-heart is the seat of a ten thousand changes.

Foolishly, I once saw things in reverse:

Leaves and branches thought I outside.

In fact, contacting one's innate knowledge already implies (right) action, or, as Wang states: knowledge and action are identical. As synonyms for innate knowledge, Wang uses the terms "the original substance of the mind," and "the principle of nature" denoting the principle of right and wrong: "The faculty of innate knowledge is to know good and evil" (Chan 1963:xxxvii). Apart from the mind nothing exists. In a constructivist sense, mind shapes the world of things. The idea that knowledge precedes action, according to Wang, "is not a minor disease" (Tu Wei-ming 1976:150). One can only speak of knowledge if one's actions reflect one's understanding.

The concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi*) is not to be credited to Wang. Already Meng Zi (Book of Mencius, 7A.15, quoted by Chan 1962) states that the knowledge possessed by man without deliberation is innate knowledge. Wang, however, extends this concept further in the sense that this innate knowledge is to be extended, and thus is only valid if translated into action. "Unless it is acted upon, it cannot be called knowledge" (Chan 1963:93).

### **Right Action**

Right Action, in the Buddhist context of the Noble Eightfold Path, is practiced by the one who deeply "sees" the human condition of suffering and focuses on its elimination through the letting go of what Wang calls "selfish desires." This process of "seeing" is not a sensory-perceptual, nor a cognitive one, but the result of an inner, almost wordless understanding of

"how it all is." Action which proceeds from this deep seeing into one's nature may be called right action, in the moral sense. Contrary to the classical Confucian<sup>3</sup> tenet that moral behavior results from a correct application of laws, ceremonies and rituals, Wang deprives man of external compasses, and squarely confronts him with his innermost being which only can be contacted through deep seeing: his innate knowledge. According to Wang, "The individual has within himself the spring of knowledge and should constantly carry into practice the things that his intuitive knowledge of good gives him opportunity to do" (Henke 1964:XIII). Time and again Wang illustrates this by the ubiquitous Confucian principle of filial piety—as an example for right action. Filial piety pertains to respecting of one's parents and of caring for them, but, in fact it defines the duties within hierarchies, i.e., not only between father and son, but likewise between ruler and minister, husband and wife, older and younger brother. In an even wider sense, it includes respect and care for the ways of Heaven and Earth. Any form of understanding of this principle has to be operationalized by (right) action. Echoing ancient Daoist doctrine, Wang describes the ideal man, the Sage, as one who "merely *returns* to the true condition of innate knowledge and does not attach to it any selfish idea...The Sage merely *follows* the functioning of his innate knowledge, and Heaven, Earth, and all things *are contained in its functioning and in its operation*" (my italics; Chan 1963:220).

According to Wang, innate knowledge is clouded not by social responsibilities or by the attachment to filial piety, but by what he calls selfish desires. The mind that is obscured by these desires has to be cleansed or to be cultivated in order to restore its original clear nature. Self-purification or *the brightening of the mirror*,<sup>4</sup> to use one of Wang's Chan Buddhist metaphors, may be achieved through meditation involving the



transcendence of ego-oriented desires. It is precisely the issue of attachment versus non-attachment to filial piety which was taken up by Wang to confront Buddhist doctrine.

### **Wang Yangming and Buddhist Ethics**

Wang's attitude towards Buddhism is, to put it mildly, problematical. The same holds true, though in a lesser degree, for his attitude towards Daoist doctrine. Having a profound theoretical knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, citing abundantly from the *Platform Scripture of the 6th Patriarch* and *The Transmission of the Lamp* (Ching 1976:159), and having spent long periods of deep meditation in a vast number of Buddhist monasteries, his sometimes vicious attacks against Buddhism are rather remarkable. Yet, shortly after Wang's death, Liu Zong Zhou (1578-1645; Tu Wei-ming 1976:74) presents him as a Chan Buddhist: "Shakyamuni represented the Buddhists in ancient times, now it is Yangming Chan." Fairbank and Reischauer call his teaching "a Zen revolt within Confucianism" (1979:192). Wing-Tsit Chan, on the contrary, denies Wang's Buddhism when he states, flatly, that "Wang's contact with Buddhist thinkers was virtually nil, his contact with Buddhist scriptures was not much greater"(1963:5).

It seems that here lies the root of the problem: Wang vehemently opposes his own concept of what "Buddhism" is, while, in fact, being a Chan Buddhist at heart. In striking out against his concept of "Buddhism" and of "Buddhists," he is quite ruthless, maybe not even realizing himself that by this very ruthlessness he is in full accord with the teaching style of the Linji School of Chan. He speaks about the Buddhists "who do not appear to be acting in accordance with moral principles" (in Henke 1964:1089), "who cannot govern and rule the empire (Henke 1964:168), "who abandon human relations" (Chan 1963:103), "who have nothing to do with the world at all"

(Chan 1963:220), and who "insist on getting away from things and events completely...gradually entering into a life of emptiness and silence, and seem to have nothing to do with the world at all. This is why they are incapable of governing the world" (Chan 1963:8).

The Buddhism Wang attacks seems a caricature and might have been utilized by him in a dialectical sense to clarify his own teaching. What he calls "Buddhism" certainly is not identical with Chan Buddhism or, more specifically, with its Linji School. Like its founder Linji Yixuan (?-867) and Linji's predecessors Mazu Daoyi (709- 788) and Huangbo Xiyun (720- 814), Wang Yangming places the Sage not in a context of monastic seclusion, but squarely in the marketplace, where identity of knowledge and action are to be realized. Chan Buddhism, likewise, can *operationally* be defined as meditation-in-action, or meditation-in-the marketplace (Tophoff 2003), and in this sense is in accord with Wang's teaching. Though Wang ridicules the "Buddhist's" penchant towards emptiness and non-attachment vis-à-vis daily matters, and thus their "abandonment of human relations" (Chan 1963:103), the Chan Master Huangbo states specifically: "Do not permit the events of your daily life to bind you, but *never withdraw yourself from them*" (in Blofeld 1958:131; my italics).

It could seemingly be argued that non-attachment and the extension of knowledge toward right action-in-the-marketplace are incompatible concepts. But, in the Buddhist tradition of Huangbo, Wang underlines the importance of right action, stemming from intuitive knowledge, which must be applied to daily human affairs—e.g., filial piety—without ever denying the concept of non-attachment. It is interesting to point out, however, that in the Caodong School of Chan, as in its Japanese counterpart Soto, the above stated incompatibility indeed forms a "true double-bind"

(Faure 1996:33). Already Siddhartha Gautama abandoned his parents, his wife and his children. Caodong Zong's founder, Dongshan Liangjie's mother became a beggar after her son left her. She died in grief in front of his monastery, whereupon Keizan, (1268-1325, quoted by Faure 38) remarked prizefully: "The power (Dongshan) achieved by forsaking his parents!" The Soto Zen Master Dogen Kigen (1200-1253) explicitly admonished his students to stop clinging to one's parents (Faure 1996:383)—"Obeying the rule of the Buddha is more important than yielding to human feelings"<sup>5</sup>—ignoring the fact that compassion itself, being one of Buddha's main virtues, is a feeling. With his extreme view, Dogen distanced himself from his own teacher Rujing (1163-1228), who was very much in line with Wang. Rujing Tiantong could rightly be called the spiritual father of Wang. Wang will later echo almost identical statements, stemming from Rujing. Like Wang (Tophoff 2003:78), Rujing ridicules "self-enlightened sages" and "Buddhist disciples" who just meditate but forget about compassion. The true disciple, in contrast, sits "in meditation with the vow to gather together all qualities of Buddhahood, therefore...he does not forsake sentient beings—having always loving thoughts even for insects and vows to rescue them....They are always in the world of desire practicing meditation and working on the way" (Cleary 1980:91-92).

Hongzhi Liangjie (1083-1159), the Chan Master from the Caodong tradition, likewise, does not emphasize seclusion or social isolation in the quest for illumination but rather an open engagement with the world (Tophoff 2003:73): "In the midst of the visible and audible world we are engaging in each event after another, but we transcend them airily and gracefully" (Chang Chung-yuan 1969:52). Thus non-attachment does not exclude focussed and right social action. Quite "worldly" indeed, Hongzhi puts emptiness into perspective, when he writes this poem:

Let go of emptiness and come back to the brambly forest.

Riding backwards on the ox, drunken and singing,

Who could dislike the misty rain

Pattering on your bamboo raincoat?

On the other hand, like Wang, Hongzhi emphasizes self-cultivation for contacting one's true nature: "[The student of Buddhism] will be able to wander silently within himself during contemplation, and he will clearly see the origin of all things" (Chang Chung-yuan *ibid*:52).

In his teaching as well as in his teaching style, Wang may be truly called a Chan Buddhist philosopher, precisely because he is an example of a well balanced integration of classical Buddhist doctrine with Daoist and Confucian elements. Ironically, it has to be said, however, that Dogen seems to include Wang, in a rather arrogant fashion, when he states that "Linji monks study the doctrines of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi...Some stress the unity of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism...the folly of such views is beyond belief!" (Collcut 1981:52).

### **Wang Yangming and the Post-Modern Business Organization**

The *Sarbanes-Oxley Act* on corporate governance became United States federal law in 2002, and has since been accepted by most of the business organizations in the developed countries. This act introduces significant legislative changes to financial practice and corporate governance regulation. It provides stringent new rules to protect investors by improving the accuracy and reliability of corporate disclosures made

pursuant to the securities laws. However, while refined legislation may serve as external beacons on the turbulent seas of post-modern corporate seafaring, true seamanship needs, to paraphrase Wang Yangming, an inner compass as well.

Wang contends that while innate knowledge constitutes the beginning of practice, action is the completion of knowing (Henke 1964:55). Action, in the sense of extending of innate or intuitive knowledge, is to be realized through self-cultivation, i.e., the consulting of one's inner compass. According to Wang, this inner compass manifests the guidelines for what the Buddhists call "right action," as long as the compass works properly. Pertaining to the post-modern organization, it could be argued that when the manager has mastered the practice of self-cultivation and contacted his intuitive knowledge, he will be able to practice right—in the sense of compassionate—action in his day-to-day functioning. The manager's practice will be discussed in the next section.

As to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, this, obviously, is not a question of either/or. Intuitive knowledge, operationalized in right action, does not at all seem to be antagonistic to the content of this law. Its function would be to serve as an inner basis on which right corporate governance could be built.

For instance, Harvey (46) offers criteria for one's actions. These are external standards, which also may serve as complements to innate knowledge. Thus, the manager could check his actions as to: (1) his motive of the action; (2) its effects; and (3) its contribution to (spiritual) development of the other person. Greed, anger and delusion motivate bad actions. Greed and anger lead ultimately to suffering. Delusion refers to

mental states and limiting mind sets which hinder a full awareness within one's perceptual field.

While agreeing to the laws of good corporate governance seems essentially to be a cognitive, rational process, contacting one's intuitive knowledge takes place on a rather different level. Here, the manager is challenged to critically review his total personal functioning-on-the-marketplace, based on an inner readiness to "clean his mirror." This delicate process of what Wang calls "self-cultivation" requires mindfulness in order to be able to practice right action in the corporate reality. .

### **The Manager's Practice of Right Action**

Different from external and formalized guidelines for right action, the teachings of Wang on the ethics of knowledge and action emphasize the manager's inner attitude, and, more specifically, the development and observation of his inner compass. These teachings need to be translated into ways of corporate practice.

As the foremost method to access the manager's inner compass or his innate knowledge, Wang emphasizes "self-cultivation." Self-cultivation may be accomplished on two different levels. First, it pertains to what might be called one's physical lifestyle. Second, it points to the Buddhist mental virtue of mindfulness.

First of all, Wang emphasizes a healthy physical life-style, as conducive to adequate functioning. A healthy lifestyle consists of a number of sound habits which include physical exercises, breath-control, healthy food and the avoidance of intoxicants. Physical exercises should thus be integrated into the manager's daily curriculum and be an essential part of his working day. Nor should breath-control be an extra-curricular activity. Breath-

control may be practiced on the working place, e.g., during stressful meetings, in the form of mindful breathing. Here, the manager focuses during only one or two minutes on his way of breathing—allowing breathing to take place not automatically and robot-like, but consciously and with mindfulness. The historical Buddha thus instructs his student Ananda on mindful breathing:

Ananda, this is how a noble disciple should proceed:

1. "While practicing breathing in, he is aware that he is breathing in. While practicing breathing out, he is aware that he is breathing out.
2. "While practicing breathing in a long or short in-breath, he is aware that he is breathing in a long or short in-breath. While practicing breathing out a long or short out-breath, he is aware that he is breathing out a long or short out-breath.
3. "While practicing breathing in, he is aware of his whole body. While practicing breathing out, he is aware of his whole body.
4. "While practicing breathing in, he allows his whole body to relax. While practicing breathing out, he allows his whole body to relax (Thich Nhat Hanh 2006).

In the everyday activity of eating and drinking, taking care of one's body in a healthy and invigorating way is also part of self-cultivation, as is the mindful balance of working and resting. All too often, rest is considered to be something outside of the realm of activity; working and resting seem to be mutually exclusive. Mindful resting, however, might be seen as an activity in itself. It should be wholly integrated within one's daily schedule.

A prerequisite for mindful resting—maybe even for a minute or so, right in the middle of the day's turmoil—is one's being in touch with the needs of the organism at a given moment in time—and to giving in to that need on the basis of trusting its validity. The Daoist philosopher Zhuang Zi describes *the Sage* as "the-man-at-ease" (Watson 1968:301). The manager, as *the-man-at-ease*, is able to avoid the trap of working versus resting, of either...or, by obeying and honouring the needs of each the moment, staying in its flow.

Wang's self-cultivation method *par excellence*, however, is meditation.<sup>6</sup> Usually, meditation refers to quiet sitting (Japanese: *zazen*). For the manager, a daily *zazen*-period of fifteen to twenty minutes would be recommendable. Next to sitting meditation, mindful meditative walking (Japanese: *kinhin*) could be equally fruitful. Both in sitting as in walking meditation, the meditator quietly watches whatever goes on in his awareness, without judging or holding on to any of its contents. Basically, this form of meditation is *just sitting* or *just walking*; in other words, there is nothing special to be accomplished through meditation. Even tranquillity, for instance, can never be the goal of meditation: "[Meditating students] gradually developed the defect of fondness for tranquillity and disgust for activity and degenerated into lifelessness like dry wood," Wang remarks pointedly (Chan 1963:217).

Neither is meditation meant to be a haven from day-to-day's burden and stress. The question is not to *seek* tranquillity, but to eventually *allow* it. So Wang warns the student of meditation: "If you seek tranquillity because you feel disgusted with external things, you will only build up an air of arrogance and laziness. But if you are not disgusted with external things, it will be good for you to cultivate yourself in a quiet place" (Chan 1963:214). Another student confronts Wang with his inability to reach tranquillity in



meditation. Empathizing with his student, Wang remarks that "One's mind is like a restless monkey and one's feelings are like a galloping horse" (Chan 1963:35). The student wonders, if there is no time when thoughts are absent, how can one speak about tranquillity? Within Chan's Daoist tradition, Wang, in response, expands implicitly on the Daoist law of opposites, e.g., activity versus rest, when he says: "Tranquillity is not without activity and activity is not without tranquillity...Is there any distinction between activity and tranquillity?...If one merely likes tranquillity, one will get confused whenever something happens...The effort made during sitting in meditation will be ineffective" (Chan 1963:191).

Sitting or walking meditation may be extended and be generalized into *meditation-in-action* or *meditation-on-the-marketplace*. In this concept the dichotomy between quiet meditation and action is transcended. Meditation-in-action is a continuous state of mindfulness. Here, a profound contact with one's actual moment-to-moment awareness allows the connection to one's intuitive knowledge to be operationalized into mindful action. The meditative state is, as it were, transferred to the action itself; meditation becomes meditation-in-action. Whatever the manager's activities, each moment-to-moment transaction is embedded in mindfulness. Here, the source of innate knowledge comes into awareness. In trusting the validity of this knowledge, and allowing himself to be guided by this compass, the manager can experience the unity of knowledge and action. The mindful awareness of intuitive of innate knowledge implies the manager's right action—beyond ego-centered desires, and designed to alleviate human and ecological suffering.

**Notes**

(1) In contrast to the Chan monk Deshan Xuanjian (780-865), who, according to Dumoulin (1959:101) burned all the sutras he had spent his life studying, after he got enlightened.

(2) It is interesting to note how a contemporary researcher like Hauser grounds morality in our biology. He states that "when we judge an action as morally right or wrong, we do so instinctively, tapping a system of unconsciously operative and inaccessible moral knowledge" (Hauser 2005:420).

(3) While Wang emphasizes intuitive knowledge, Theravada Buddhist doctrine describes right action in the sense of five external precepts (Pali: panca-sila) which include: 1. Avoiding violence in any form; 2. Not taking what has not been given; 3. Avoiding sexual misconduct; 4. Abstaining from false speech; 5. Avoiding intoxicants.

(4) Wang uses a well-known Chan Buddhist metaphor, which he undoubtedly took from the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.

(5) Two centuries before Wang Yang-ming, Dogen already emphasized the unity of (Zen) practice and enlightenment, pointing to just sitting, in which that unity is realized (Japanese: shi-kan taza).

(6) While meditation appears to be an adequate method in the training of mindfulness, the mindfulness training method of Sensory Awareness equally has proven to be an efficient tool (Tophoff 2003). Sensory Awareness is deeply rooted in Mahayana Buddhist soil (Tophoff 2000; 2006).

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