

# The Ox Mountain Parable of Meng Tzu

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## **Introductory Note**

In the fourth and third centuries B.C., in an age (like ours) of war and chaos, Meng Tzu (Mencius) built on the spiritual foundations which had been laid by Confucius. One of his central intuitions was that human nature was basically good, but that this basic goodness was destroyed by evil acts, and had tactfully to be brought out by right education, education in 'humanness'. The great man, said Mencius, is the man who has not lost the heart of a child. This statement was not meant to be sentimental. It implied the serious duty to preserve the spontaneous and deep natural instinct to love, that instinct which is protected by the mysterious action of life itself and of providence, but which is destroyed by the wilfulness, the passionate arbitrariness of man's greed. In contrast to Mencius were Mo Tzu and the Legalist School, who wanted man to be forced into the path of an abstract universal love (Mo Tzu) by the power of law, and the threat of punishment (the Legalists). Man being evil, his evil tendencies had to be harnessed and exploited by the power of the Ruler. But Meng Tzu believed that man was good, and that the function of a wise and merciful Ruler was to bring out the goodness in his subjects by education. This is a parable of mercy. Note especially the emphasis of Meng Tzu on the 'night wind' which is here rendered 'night spirit', the merciful, pervasive and mysterious influence of unconscious nature which, according to him, as long as it is not tampered with, heals and revives man's good tendencies, his 'right mind'.

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## Meng Tzu: The Ox Mountain Parable

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MASTER MENG SAID: "THERE WAS ONCE  
A FINE FOREST ON THE OX MOUNTAIN,  
Near the capital of a populous country.  
The men came out with axes and cut down the trees.  
Was it still a forest?  
Yet, resting in the alternation of days and nights,  
moistened by dew,  
The stumps sprouted, the trees began to grow again.  
Then out came goats and cattle to browse  
on the young shoots.  
The Ox Mountain was stripped utterly bare.  
And the people, seeing it stripped utterly bare  
Think the Ox Mountain never had any woods on it at all.

2

OUR MIND TOO, STRIPPED BARE,  
LIKE THE MOUNTAIN,  
Still cannot be without some basic tendency to love.  
But just as men with axes, cutting down  
the trees every morning,  
Destroy the beauty of the forest,  
So we, by our daily actions, destroy our right mind.  
Day follows night, giving rest to the murdered forest,  
The moisture of the dawn spirit  
Awakens in us the right loves, the right aversions.  
With the actions of one morning we destroy this love,  
And destroy it again. At last the night spirit  
Is no longer able to revive our right mind.  
Where then, do our likes and dislikes differ  
from those of animals?  
In nothing much.  
Men see us, and say we never had in us  
anything but evil.  
Is this man's nature?

WHATEVER IS CULTIVATED RIGHTLY,  
WILL SURELY GROW.

Whatever is not cultivated rightly must surely perish.

Master Kung (Confucius) said:

Grasp it firmly and you will keep it.

Grasp it loosely, and it will vanish  
out of your hand.

Its comings and goings have  
no fixed times:

No one knows its country!

Of man's right mind, of this only does he speak!"