The Sayings of Mencius*

Mencius (Mèngzǐ)

Circa 300 BCE

Mencius went to see King Hui of Liang. The king said, "Venerable Sir, since you have not counted it far to come here a distance of a thousand li, may I presume that you are likewise provided with counsels to profit my kingdom?"

Mencius replied, "Why must your Majesty used that word 'profit'? What I am likewise provided with are counsels to benevolence and righteousness; and these are my only topics.If your Majesty say, 'What is to be done to profit my kingdom?' the great officers will say, 'What is to be done to profit our families?' and the inferior officers and the common people will say, 'What is to be done to profit our persons?' Superiors and inferiors will try to take the profit the one from the other, and the kingdom will be endangered. In the kingdom of ten thousand chariots, the murderer of his ruler will be the chief of a family of a thousand chariots. In the State of a thousand chariots, the murderer of his ruler will be the chief of a family of a hundred chariots. To have a thousand in ten thousand, and a hundred in a thousand, cannot be regarded as not a large allowance; but if righteousness be put last and profit first, they will not be satisfied without snatching all. There never was a man trained to benevolence who neglected his parents. There never was a man trained to righteousness who made his ruler an after consideration. Let your Majesty likewise make benevolence and righteousness your only themes—Why must you speak of profit?"

When Mencius, another day, was seeing King Hui of Liang, the King went and stood with him by a pond, and, looking round on the wild geese and deer, large and small, said, "Do wise and good princes also take pleasure in these things?"

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Mencius replied, “Being wise and good, they then have pleasure in these things. If they are not wise and good, though they have these things, they do not find pleasure.”

King Hui of Liang said, “Small as my virtue is, in the government of my kingdom, I do indeed exert my mind to the utmost. If the year be bad inside the Ho, I remove as many of the people as I can to the east of it, and convey grain to the country inside. If the year be bad on the east of the river, I act on the same plan. On examining the governmental methods of the neighboring kingdoms, I do not find there is any ruler who exerts his mind as I do. And yet the people of the neighboring kings do not decrease, nor do my people increase—how is this?”

Mencius replied, “Your Majesty loves war; allow me to take an illustration from war. The soldiers move forward at the sound of the drum; and when the edges of their weapons have been crossed, on one side, they throw away their buff coats, trail their weapons behind them, and run. Some run a hundred paces and then stop; some run fifty paces and stop. What would you think if these, because they had run but fifty paces, should laugh at those who ran a hundred paces?”

The king said, “They cannot do so. They only did not run a hundred paces; but they also ran.”

Mencius said, “Since your Majesty knows this you have no ground to expect that your people will become more numerous than those of the neighboring kingdoms. If the seasons of husbandry be not interfered with, the grain will be more than can be eaten. If close nets are not allowed to enter the pools and ponds, the fish and turtles will be more than can be consumed. If the axes and bills enter the hill-forests only at the proper times, the wood will be more than can be used. When the grain and fish and turtles are more than can be eaten, and there is more wood than can be used, this enables the people to nourish their living and do all offices for their dead, without any feeling against any. But this condition, in which the people nourish their living, and do all offices to their dead without having any feeling against any, is the first step in the Royal way. Let mulberry trees be planted about the homesteads with their five acres, and persons of fifty years will be able to wear silk. In keeping fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, let not their time of breeding be neglected, and persons of seventy years will be able to eat flesh. Let there not be taken away the time that is proper for the cultivation of the field allotment of a hundred acres, and the family of several mouths will not suffer from hunger. Let careful attention be paid to the teaching in the various schools, with repeated inculcation of the filial and fraternal duties, and gray-haired men will not be seen upon the roads, carrying burdens on their backs or on their heads. It has never been that the ruler of a State where these results were seen, persons of seventy wearing silk and eating flesh, and the black-haired people suffering neither from hunger nor cold, did not attain to the Royal dignity. Your dogs and swine eat the food of men, and you do not know to store up of the abundance. There are people dying from famine on the roads, and you do not know to issue your stores for their relief. When men die, you say, ‘It is not owing to me; it is owing to the year,’ In what does this differ from stabbing a man and killing him, and then saying, ‘It was not I; it was the

weapon'? Let your Majesty cease to lay the blame on the year and instantly the people, all under the sky, will come to you."

King Hui of Liang said, "I wish quietly to receive your instructions."

Mencius replied, "Is there any difference between killing a man with a stick and with a sword?"

"There is no difference," was the answer.

Mencius continued, "Is there any difference between doing it with a sword and with governmental measures?"

"There is not," was the answer again.

Mencius then said, "In your stalls there are fat beasts; in your stables there are fat horses. But your people have the look of hunger, and in the fields there are those who have died of famine. This is leading on beasts to devour men. Beasts devour one another, and men hate them for doing so. When he who is called the parent of the people conducts his government so as to be chargeable with leading on beasts to devour men, where is that parental relation to the people? Chung-ne said, 'Was he not without posterity who first made wooden images to bury with the dead?' So he said, because that man made the semblances of men and used them for that purpose; what shall be thought of him who causes his people to die of hunger?"

King Hui of Liang said, "There was not in the kingdom a stronger State than Ts'in, as you, venerable Sir, know. But since it descended to me, on the east we were defeated by Ts'e, and then my eldest son perished; on the west we lost seven hundred li of territory to Ts'in; and on the south we have sustained disgrace at the hands of Ts'oo. I have brought shame on my departed predecessors, and wish on their account to wipe it away once for all. What course is to be pursued to accomplish this?"

Mencius replied, "With a territory only a hundred li square it has been possible to obtain the Royal dignity. If your Majesty will indeed dispense a benevolent government to the people, being sparing in the use of punishments and fines, and making the taxes and levies of produce light, so causing that the fields shall be ploughed deep, and the weeding well attended to, and that the able-bodied, during their days of leisure, shall cultivate their filial piety, fraternal duty, faithfulness, and truth, serving thereby, at home, their fathers and elder brothers, and, abroad, their elders and superiors, you will then have a people who can be employed with sticks which they have prepared to oppose the strong buff-coats and sharp weapons of the troops of Ts'in and Ts'oo. The rulers of those States rob their people of their time, so that they cannot plough and weed their fields in order to support their parents. Parents suffer from cold and hunger; elder and younger brothers, wives and children, are separated and scattered abroad. Those rulers drive their people into pitfalls or into the water; and your Majesty will go to punish them. In such a case, who will oppose your Majesty? In accordance with this is the saying, 'The benevolent has no enemy!' I beg your Majesty not to doubt what I said."