



## Old Man (图)

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the crack of dawn the old man is already up. He comes out of his gher (a round, felt covered dwelling) and looks up at the sky to see what weather has in store for the day and glances into the shed. Upon returning to the gher he sits down silently in the corner with legs crossed and puffing on his pipe. His face is impassive. It does not register a flicker of joy nor a shadow of emotion, nor worry nor disappointment. With time man renounces the vanities of life, and his soul attains an equilibrium.

As usual, his daughter-in-law hands to him a cup of fresh tea, holding the cup with both hands. The old man is the first to be served in the family. With a quick movement of his hands he turns down the nudraga (chaff of sleeve, often used instead of gloves). According to tradition, one should turn it down when receiving a meal or a gift, and carefully receives the cup. Taking a sip as a sign of acknowledgement, he puts the cup down upon the small table in front of him to let the tea cool off a bit.

The grandson crawls up to him and clutching at his deel (robe) rises to his feet and swaying, takes several unsteady steps. The old man sits motionless. On reaching the grandfather's knees the child makes an attempt to climb into his lap. The grandfather kisses the child's forehead and carefully puts him down on the floor. Thus he acknowledges his grandchild's first steps.

The old man will not kiss the child again soon. Rarely does he caress him but he also becomes angry seldom. Only his eyes command, censure and punish, express pity or compassion, and forgive.

Seeing someone treating a horse with a whip or accidentally spilling milk into drinking water, the old man will frown and say in displeasure "What kind of a Mongol are you?" If people gossip in his presence or the old man detects a touch of envy and callousness in a speaker's voice, he will shoot him an angry glance and say "Are you a human?" and just relapse into silence. If very angry, he will not utter a word but turn away. And for two or three days he will not so much as speak.

It happens that locals ignore a man who did a dishonor conduct or an offence. Such a punishment considered to be the most harsh. Indeed, no other punishment can be more hurting than denial of human communication. No one to greet and to ask about health, to do a small talk.

Only a few words just out of politeness. In this way most of our old men express their disapproval. For the old men perceive the acceptance of a mean act as an equivalent of their consent.

Sipping his tea, the old man, at last, talks to the grandson and the daughter-in-law, tasting fresh milk cream and aarul (dried curds) prepared from camel's milk.

A person getting on his years sleeps less and eats less, and stops relishing dainties and wearing silk clothes and sables. His clothes become more modest and food simpler. Whenever he goes to a feast or to the pasture, he invariably wears an old deel (a robe) and rides a good old horse. He may seem indifferent about what he eats and wears and what he looks like since death stares him in the face. But this is not so.

With the age advancing, a person comprehends the world more and more profoundly. The more he learns, the more he wants to understand what binds his body and soul to the surrounding world - the mountains, the rivers, the lands, and the plants and the animals.

As he reflects on this, his memory travels far back into the past. And he also tries to penetrate into the future. He realizes that man is but a grain of sand of Mother Earth, a drop of its waters, and he senses his affinity with living nature, and is aware of being bound by the totality of its laws.

How great the Earth is! Great and simple at the same time. Man himself is like its particle. The Earth and man have the same roots of existence, and when he grasps this truth, the borderline between the highest and the lowest, and wealth and poverty becomes insignificant.

And a fount of compassion opens up his soul nourishing both old folks and newborns. If he can bestow his compassion and good deed on his fellow man, he becomes as great and generous as Mother Earth itself.

Expressing with a look his gratitude to the daughter-in-law for the tea, the old man falls silent. Now and then his eyes rest on the grandson. Whether he is thinking about his past life or about his life's work, or about what he taught his children and grandchildren, no one will ever know.

He returns greetings of a visitor entering the gher and will listen to what the guest has to say believing that esteem for human being is paramount. He will weight the guest's words, think it over with another wrinkle adding to his forehead and then offer a word of wisdom that

t may be of help to the guest. Then he sees the guest off with kind, encouraging words.

Mature people are not so much concerned about their own sorrows and joys as about others. For maturity of thought above all is the ability to understand the essence of happiness and misfortune. The deeper the understanding, the more clear becomes the meaning of life, and then the only way he comes to see the life is the path of humble kindness to others.

The old man rises to his feet, smoothes out the hem of his old robe made of simple Tibetan cloth, tightens his sash, takes a worn cap with a red tassel from the chest in the corner, and goes out of the gher. Tightening the saddle-girth of his ashen color horse with an untrimmed mane, he gets into saddle and sets off to the neighboring family to see relatives.

After a while the familiar place comes into view. The old man pulls in reins, and the horse breaks into a slow trot.

Seeing the venerable old man from distance, the happy hosts begin quickly to tidy up the gher and spread out a matted carpet. No one seems to notice the old deel worn by the old man, or the old gray horse with which the old man never parts.

They see and admire only the old man himself, his imposing and sedate manner, and his proud bearing in the saddle. To them, the old man looks more graceful than a young man wearing a shiny silk robe on a stallion at a gallop. For the wisdom and venerable age are always majestic.

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