

The Elephant

The Buddha often spoke of the elephant as signifying the Bodhisattva with his wisdom and compassion. The Bodhisattva, like the elephant, is incapable of forgetting anything which is relevant to what he needs to know. At the same time, he is suffused by supreme detachment....Just as little children can approach elephants with no fear of being hurt, so too may all men and women approach the Bodhisattva.

Raghavan Iyer
The Jewel in the Lotus

In the ancient Hindu scripture, “Udana”, is a tale called “The Blind Men and the Elephant.”

Once upon a time six blind men from Hindustan were taken to a large, stately elephant. They approached it in a learned, serious manner. Each wished to know, from experience, the nature of an elephant. The first blind man walked into the elephant’s massive side, declaring the elephant to be very like a wall. The second grasped a tusk saying, “It’s like a spear.” The third, grasping its trunk declared, “It’s like a large snake.” The fourth fell against the elephant’s leg exclaiming, “It’s like a huge tree.” Reaching out his hand, the fifth felt the elephant’s ear saying, “The elephant is like a large fan.” The sixth taking hold of the tail declared the elephant to be much like a rope.

The blind men fell into argument, each claiming to know the elephant’s nature. Each held fast to his position, the arguments never resolved.

From one standpoint this story illustrates Socrates’ teaching of double-ignorance—thinking one knows when one

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does not. Socrates teaches this to be the source of human conflict. From another standpoint, it illustrates the mysterious nature of the elephant, literally and symbolically—multifaceted.

Drawings, paintings, sculptures, hieroglyphs and stories of elephants are found around the globe: in caves of Lascaux; in India's Elephanta Caves; in the temples of Egypt—in which the elephant had its own hieroglyph; in accounts of Buddha's conception and birth; and in early Christian writings, portraying the elephant symbolically, in teaching Christianity and its sublime ethics.

In the East the elephant has symbolized divine manifestation, wisdom and effortless equilibrium. Its incessant traveling, with only a brief rest around high-noon and three hours of sleep ending at dawn is reminiscent of the spiritual Path—courageous, ceaseless, patient trudging. The elephant's birth is witnessed only by its mother and its "nurse." In this sense its initial manifestation is hidden, corresponding to emanation of the One from Divine Darkness. In the wild its natural death is hidden—has yet to be observed.

Elephants can be docile, cunning, raging and obedient. *Mahouts*—keepers, drivers and companions of elephants—intimately know the nature of the beast. An elephant must be trained in order to serve man. They are always rewarded for a task well-done. Their training—at times—may, to an outside

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observer, appear to be cruel. It is not. As in the training of a willful child, consistency in discipline is required: consequences and rewards understood. The elephant's proclivities must become congruent with the will of the mahout. This is signified by the elephant lying on its side emitting a loud sigh. Until this surrender occurs meaningful training cannot begin.

The mahout comes to know an elephant's unique character enabling a suitable training approach. Generally speaking, there are three distinct elephant temperaments corresponding to the three *gunas*, each with sub-divisions. An elephant's temperament is readily ascertained. Where it stands within that temperament can be known only through the mahout's quiet observations.

The *Tamasic guna*—lazy, dark, sluggish— temperament requires stringent, structured, forceful discipline with rewards based on duration of attention and compliance. Initially there are frequent consequences and rewards leading to longer periods of compliance until the desired behavior become natural.

The *Rajasic guna*—energetic, seeking, restless— temperament requires a discipline appropriately channeling these energies without being diminished. To channel without diminishing reflects the intuitive perception, understanding and respect of the mahout for the elephant's nobility.

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The *Sattavic guna*—quiet, compassionate, empathetic—temperament requires the ability to bring forth these qualities in compliant broader expressions. Historically, elephants with this temperament have been trained for the use of royalty.

A trained elephant responds to the mahout's language, tone of voice, touch and thoughts. The relationship between the two becomes so strong that elephants have been seen to weep, to grieve their close companion's death.

In ancient Hindu tradition the elephant's creation is said to be sacrificial for the service of mankind. "The Unborn" is said to have separated the two halves of the Cosmic Egg, holding one in each hand while simultaneously uttering seven mantras. This resulted in the creation of seven sacred elephant deities, four of whom guard mankind in the four directions. These elephants produced numerable holy offspring. Elephants freely roamed heaven and earth in divine joy. One day, however, several of them inadvertently disturbed the meditations of a sage, who then cursed all elephants, except those guarding the four directions, dispelling them from heaven. *Palakapya*—wisest of all elephants—was born after the curse in order to care for those elephants forced to live only upon the earth, among human.

Within Buddhist scriptures Bodhisattvas are often symbolized as elephants. Buddha sometimes encouraged seekers to live as a free forest elephant, serene, unattached or

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wedded to no place. Upon conceiving Gautama, his mother Maya experienced a vision of a massive white elephant above her head. The vision repeated shortly before her son's birth. This time the massive white elephant slowly descended, becoming smaller and smaller until it entered the top of her head. Thus the Buddha was born.

Shiva's wife, Parvati, beheld the *OM* in a vision morphing into two coupling white elephants. Thus was Ganesh born, after which the *OM* reappeared before Parvati's eyes. Ganesh had seven siblings. When the time came for Shiva and Parvati to choose who would succeed them, they proposed a race among their sons. They must circle the entire universe. The first to return would rule the kingdom. Six sped off at lightening pace. Ganesh ran nowhere. He walked around—in a clockwise direction—his parents' throne three times. Standing before them he then said, "You are my universe. I have circled you three times." Thus did Ganesh become the successor. He came to symbolize filial piety, devotion to the wise, remover of obstacles and protector of households.

Those who spend their lives with elephants say that "the Abu think; and they think of us; they have compassion as well as a mere desire to protect their human friends. In return they ask only this—that you devote your entire life to them."

Barrett Culmback

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