

The Whole Elephant

February 16, 2016

You probably know the story of the blind men and the elephant. A king gets his men to gather up the blind people in the city and then says, “Okay, show them an elephant.” So some of the blind people touch the elephant’s legs. Some touch his trunk. Some touch his tusks. Some touch his body. Some touch his tail. And depending on what they touched, they have their ideas about what an elephant is like. Some say the elephant’s like a post. Or the elephant’s like a granary, like a winnowing basket, like the pole of a plow. My favorite comparison comes from the ones who touched the tail and said, “The elephant is like a broom.” And then the blind people start fighting one another over whose image of the elephant is right, saying, “It’s like this. It’s not like that.” The creepy part of the story, of course, is that the king did this for his entertainment and he’s gratified by the sight of the blind people fighting.

What’s even creepier, though, is that there’s another version of the story in the Chinese Canon—the same story, but interpreted differently. In the Pali Canon, the blind people represent non-Buddhist sectarians. They don’t know the Dhamma and so they fight over the Dhamma because they don’t really know it. In the Chinese version, though, the blind people stand for all people, Buddhist or not, basically saying that even Buddhists are blind. There’s nobody who can really know the Dhamma. All we know is winnowing baskets, brooms, granaries, and posts. We don’t really know the elephant—and what’s more, it’s impossible for us to know the elephant. So we shouldn’t fight over our interpretations. Instead, we should just accept that some people see the elephant as a winnowing a basket, so they have to content themselves with a winnowing basket, while you have to content yourself with your broom or your granary or whatever.

And this version of the story is not just in the Chinese Canon. It’s still told to this day in all kinds of Buddhist sects. It’s a really destructive take on the story because the implication is that nobody can ever know the Dhamma. It’s too big. And the other implication, of course, is that you might as well stop trying to figure out what way of knowing which version of the Dhamma is right or not.

It is true that there’s an awful lot in the Buddha’s awakening, much more than we can fathom. As he said, it’s like a forest full of leaves, whereas what he taught was just a handful of leaves. But it is a handful. It’s not too much to grasp. And the handful contains everything that’s important to know.

And it’s something we can get not only our hands but also our heads around: the four noble truths. That’s not all that much to comprehend. To paraphrase Ajaan Lee, “There are people out there who can manage orchards of thousands of acres, and here we have just four noble truths, or four jhanas, and we can’t get them straight. It’s kind of embarrassing”—the implication being, of course, that there’s not all that much we have to master. And it is something we can master.

And we're not going to spend our whole lives always being blind. After all, the Buddha was One with Eyes, the All-around Eye, and one of his images for his act of teaching the path is that he's a doctor who can cure people of their blindness. You probably know that story as well. There's a blind man and someone gives him a cloth. It's a dirty old rag, but the person giving him the cloth says, "Here's a nice white piece of cloth. It looks really good on you." So the blind man takes good care of the dirty old rag, thinking it's a nice white piece of cloth. But then his friends and relatives take him to a doctor who can cure him of his blindness. As he gets his sight back, he looks at the cloth. He sees that it's a dirty old rag. What he thought was valuable was not.

The gaining of sight, of course, is the gaining of the Dhamma eye, when you see that there is really something deathless; and it can be obtained through the path.

So we're here to get over our blindness. And we have to take it as our encouragement the principle that it is possible to get over our blindness. Don't listen to the people who say you can't.

Just this evening, a magazine arrived in which someone was writing about how when he started on the Buddha's path, he was hoping for enlightenment, but what he got instead was awakening to the fact that there really is nothing to know. You should satisfy yourself with this state of not knowing, he said. That, again, is a destructive way of thinking. There *is* something to know. And when you know it, it makes a huge difference. To begin with, it confirms the fact that your actions really do make a difference in your life. You know that if you hadn't acted on the path, you wouldn't have reached the deathless. You wouldn't have seen the deathless.

And you also see, in stepping out of space and time, just how long this process of suffering has been. That gives you all the more encouragement to do what you can to get past it, to complete the practice, even though you realize that in gaining this vision you've cut off a lot of the suffering that you would have had to go through if you hadn't gained this vision, this eye, this sight. But still, you gain a glimpse of what it's like to be totally free of suffering. Just the act of being in the six senses, being immersed in the world of the space and time in the six senses: There's a lot of suffering there. So that's what motivates you to get rid of the suffering still remaining.

So take heart in the fact that, however blind you may feel you are in terms of the path, blindness can be cured. This is what the noble eightfold path is all about. If you develop right view all the way through right concentration, these qualities enable you to see more clearly. And here, again, think about that interpretation of the story of the elephant. If you say that everybody's blind and they have to content themselves with winnowing baskets and brooms and whatnot, there seems to be no right or wrong. But right view really differs from wrong view, and it's right because it works. It really does form a part of the path to the deathless that takes you out of your blindness. Right resolve is right because it works – and so on down all the factors of the path.

The more mindful you are when you've learned a lesson that helps you to see more clearly, the more concentrated the mind, the more still you are, then the more you can see what's going on inside. And even before you hit the deathless, you're able to see parts of your mind that were hidden in blind spots up to that point.

So we're here to see and to develop the qualities of mind that enable us to see: the right view that has us look at the right spot; the right effort that helps to clear away the things that get in the way of our seeing; and the right concentration that gives us an all-around vision. We get the mind centered, and once it's properly centered, it can look around itself—because you not only see the object that you're focused on when you concentrate, but you also begin to see the activities of the mind as they relate to the object. That's what you want to see.

You want to see what you're doing. This is *the* big blind spot in our lives and it's very ironic. If it's right close to us—what we're doing, our intentions for why we're doing things—you'd think we would know these things clearly. But we have a tendency to hide them from ourselves, or just to get interested in other things so much that we don't see what we're doing.

So when we practice, we're turning the spotlight in the right spot: What are you doing right now? What's the intention behind it? How are you doing it? How skillfully are you doing it? To what extent are you giving rise to stress, pain, dis-ease or disturbance by what you're doing? And how can you get the mind more still to step back from those activities? See which actions are unskillful so that you can drop them. See which ones are skillful so you that can keep doing them until they've done the work.

As we keep following this path, as the Buddha said, eventually it will take us to a place that we haven't seen before—to see the as-yet-unseen. It's unseen not because it's unseeable, but simply because we haven't looked in the right place. We haven't looked properly. We don't have the right vision yet, the right capacity to see it. But that's something that can be developed, because someday we really will see the whole elephant, and we can throw away our concepts of winnowing baskets, brooms, and granaries

Of course, it's not just a matter of seeing. The Buddha also gives us ways of checking our seeing. You know the story, too, of the elephant hunter looking for a bull elephant in the forest. He sees the tracks of an elephant, but he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that this has got to be a bull elephant. But still, the tracks look likely, so he follows them. He sees scratch marks in the trees, but again he doesn't jump to the conclusion that this has to be a bull elephant. He's looking for a bull elephant because he needs one to do some heavy work. When he saw the footprints, he knew that it might be dwarf females with big feet. He sees the scratch marks: These might be tall females with tusks. It's only when he actually sees the elephant that he knows he's got the bull elephant he wants.

The footprints and the scratch marks stand for the various stages on the path: the development of concentration, the development of some of the psychic powers that come from concentration. But the vision of the deathless: That's the whole elephant. And it's something human beings can see.

I was talking with a scholar recently who was saying that he didn't think that any conditioned human being could see the deathless. As far as he was concerned, all human beings were conditioned beings, so how could a conditioned being see anything unconditioned?

But he was thinking backwards. The Buddha's approach wasn't to define what a human being is and then from that definition, decide what human beings can and can't know. Instead, he looked at what human beings can do and what they can know as the result of their actions. And looking this way took him to a place that really was unconditioned. That's when he realized that defining yourself as being this, that, or the other thing is placing a limitation on yourself. This ranges from anything as simple as the idea that: "I am innately good," or "I am innately bad," up to whatever "I am" you might choose. If you're going to choose an "I am," just choose an "I am" that says, "I am capable of changing the way I act and of finding awakening." That one will get you through. And you know that you have the capacity to see the whole elephant when the whole elephant appears. That's the proof that you don't always have to be blind.