

The Elephant King Goodness Jataka Tale (Generosity and Ingratitude)

Once upon a time the Enlightenment Being was born as an elephant. He was wonderfully white in colour, glowing like polished silver. His feet were as smooth and bright as the finest lacquer. His mouth was as red as the most elegant red carpet. And his marvellous eyes were like precious jewels, sparkling in five colours—blue, yellow, red, white and crimson.

The splendid beauty of this magnificent elephant was the outer form of the Enlightenment Being. But this was only a pale reflection of his inner beauty—because during many previous lives he had filled himself with the Ten Perfections: energy, determination, truthfulness, wholesomeness, giving up attachment to the ordinary world, evenmindedness, wisdom, patience, generosity, and of course—loving-kindness.

When he became an adult, all the other elephants in the Himalayan forests came to follow and served him. Before long his kingdom contained a population of 80,000 elephants. Such a large nation was crowded and filled with distractions. In order to live more quietly, he separated himself from the rest and went to live alone in a secluded part of the forest. Because of his wholesomeness and purity, which were easily seen by everyone, he was known as the Elephant King Goodness.

In the meantime, a forester from Benares travelled into these Himalayan foothills. He was searching for things of value he could sell back in Benares. After a while he lost his sense of direction. He ran back and forth trying to find his way. Soon he became exhausted and scared to death! He began trembling and crying out loud from fear.

The Elephant King Goodness heard the sound of the poor lost man's frightened weeping. Immediately he was filled with pity and compassion. Wishing to help him in any way he could, he began walking through the forest towards him.

But the man was in such a big panic that, when he saw the gigantic elephant coming towards him, he started running away. When the wise elephant king saw this, he stopped moving. Seeing this, the forester also stopped. Then King Goodness began walking towards him again, the man started running, and once again stopped when the elephant stopped.

At that point the man thought, "This noble elephant! When I run, he stops. And when I stop, he walks towards me. No doubt he intends me no harm—he must want to help me instead!" Realising this gave him the courage to stop and wait.

As the Elephant King Goodness slowly approached, he said, "My human friend, why are you wandering about crying in panic?"

"Lord elephant," said the man, "I lost all sense of direction, became hopelessly lost,

and was afraid I would die!”

Then the Enlightenment Being took the forester to his own secluded dwelling place. He comforted and soothed him by treating him to the finest fruits and nuts in all the Himalayas. After several days he said, “My friend, don’t be afraid. I will take you to the land where people live. Sit on my back.” Then he began carrying him towards the land of men.

While riding comfortably on this glorious being, the man thought, “Suppose people ask me where I was. I must be able to tell everything.” So he made notes of all the landmarks, while being carried to safety by the kind elephant king.

When he came out of the thick forest near the highway to Benares, the Elephant King Goodness said, “My good friend, take this road to Benares. Please don’t tell anyone where I live, whether they ask you or not.” With these parting words, the gentle elephant turned around and went back to his safe and secret home.

The man had no trouble finding his way to Benares. Then one day, while walking in the bazaar, he came to the shops of the ivory carvers. They carved ivory into delicate and beautiful statues, scenes and shapes. The forester asked them, “Would you buy tusks that come from living elephants?”

The ivory carvers replied, “What a question! Everyone knows the tusks from a live elephant are much more valuable than from a dead one.” “Then I will bring you some live elephant tusks,” said the forester.

Caring only for money, ignoring the safety of the elephant king, and without any gratitude towards the one who had saved his life—the man put a sharp saw in with his other provisions, and set out towards the home of King Goodness.

When he arrived the elephant king asked him, “Oh my dear human friend, what brings you back again?” Making up a story, the greedy man said, “My lord elephant, I am a poor man, living very humbly. As these times are very difficult for me, I have come to beg from you just a little piece of tusk. If you can give it to me, I will take it home and sell it. Then I will be able to provide for myself, and survive for a while longer.”

Pitying the man, the Elephant King Goodness said, “Of course my friend, I will give you a big piece of tusk! Did you happen to bring a saw with you?” “Yes lord,” said the forester, “I did bring a saw.” “All right then,” said the generous King Goodness, “cut from both my tusks!”

As he said this, the elephant bent down on his knees and offered up his spectacular silvery-white tusks. Without the slightest regret, the man sawed off big pieces of ivory from both tusks.

The Enlightenment Being picked up both pieces with his trunk. He said, “Good friend, I am not giving you my lovely tusks because I dislike them and want to get rid of them. Nor is it because they are not valuable to me. But a thousand times, even a hundred thousand times more lovely and valuable are the tusks of all knowable

wisdom, which leads to the realisation of all Truth.”

Giving the wonderful tusks to the man, it was the elephant’s wish that his perfect generosity would eventually lead him to the greatest wisdom.

The man went home and sold both pieces of ivory. But it didn’t take long for him to spend all the money. So again he returned to the Elephant King Goodness. He begged him, “My lord, the money I got by selling your ivory was only enough to pay off my debts. I am still a poor man, living very humbly. Times are still hard in Benares, so please give me the rest of your tusks, oh generous one!”

Without hesitation, the elephant king offered what was left of his tusks. The man cut off all that he could see of them, right down to the sockets in the elephant’s skull! He left without a word of thanks. The wonderful kind elephant meant no more to him than a bank account! He took the ivory back to Benares, sold it, and squandered the money as before.

Once again the forester returned to the Himalayan home of the Elephant King Goodness. And again he begged him, “Oh noble elephant king, it is so very hard to make a living in Benares. Have pit on me and let me have the rest of your ivory—the roots of your tusks.”

Perfect generosity holds nothing back. So once again the elephant king bent down on his knees and offered his remaining stumps of ivory. The ungrateful betrayer did not care at all for the elephant. He stepped onto the magnificent trunk—like a thick silver chain. He climbed up and sat between the pure white temples, on top of the great head—like a snowy Himalayan dome. Then he roughly dug in with his heels, rubbing and tearing away the tender flesh from the stumps of the once-beautiful tusks. He used his dull worn-down saw to cut and hack the ivory roots out of the noble skull!

It is said there are many worlds—the hell world of torture, the worlds of hungry ghosts, of animals and of mankind, as well as many heaven worlds—from the lowest to the highest. In all these worlds there are millions of beings that, at one time or another, have been born and lived as elephants. And some who tell this story say, that although they knew not why, all those one-time elephants felt the pain of the Great Being—the Elephant King Goodness.

The forester departed carrying the bloody ivory stumps. Thinking there was no reason to see the elephant again, he didn’t bother to show any sign of gratitude or respect.

The vast solid earth, which is strong enough to easily support great mountains, and is able to bear the worst filth and stench, could not bear and support this cruel man’s enormous unwholesomeness. So, when he could no longer be seen by the suffering elephant, the mighty earth cracked open beneath him. Fire from the lowest hell world leaped up, engulfed him in bright red flames, and pulled him down to his doom!

The moral is: The ungrateful stops at nothing, and digs his own grave.

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