

Opinions, Disagreements and an Elephant

Theme: why people are convinced that their own wrong opinions are the truth

This is what we have been told. Once, a long time ago, the Buddha and his followers were staying in the Jeta Wood, just outside the town of Savatthi. At that time a large number of holy men and wandering philosophers were also living near Savatthi, all putting forward their own various opinions as being the only truth.

So, some of them said, 'Human beings have a soul that will continue to exist for ever; this is the only true point of view, all other views are false.' Others said, 'Human beings do *not* have a soul that will continue to exist for ever; this is the only true point of view, all other views are false.' Some of them said, 'The world was created by God; this is the only true point of view, all other views are false.' Others said, 'The world was *not* created by God; this is the only true point of view, all other views are false.' Some of them said that when people become perfect in wisdom they continue to exist after their bodies die. Others said that that people who become perfect in wisdom do *not* continue to exist after their bodies die. And another group said that people who gain perfect wisdom *both do and do not* continue to exist after their bodies die. And so the question as to what is or is not the real truth was the subject of endless disagreements and quarrels.

The Buddha's followers listened to all these quarrels and decided to ask the Buddha what he thought. He replied, 'None of these people, endlessly disagreeing about their own points of view, properly understand the Dharma wisdom – the *real* truth: they do not understand what sort of knowledge is helpful, true or real.'

And to explain what he meant, he told his followers the story of the elephant, as follows:

'Some time ago there was a king, here in this very town of Savatthi, who presented an elephant to a group of blind people and asked them to tell him what sort of a creature it was. Never having seen an elephant, their way of finding out about it was to go up to it and touch it. One of them touched the elephant's trunk and said, 'An elephant is like a snake.' Another touched the elephant's head and said, 'An elephant is like a water-jar.' One touched the

elephant's ear and said, 'An elephant is like a basket.' Another touched one of the elephant's legs and said, 'An elephant is like a pillar'. One touched the elephant's body and said, 'An elephant is like a store-room.' Another touched the elephant's tail, and said, 'An elephant is like a piece of rope'. And finally one of them touched the tuft of hair at the end of the elephant's tail and said, 'An elephant is like a broom for sweeping.' And when they heard each other saying such different things about the elephant, they all started arguing, each saying that their own view of the elephant was the only correct one and that all of the others were wrong.

'I like this story,' said the Buddha, 'because it shows that people disagree when they don't understand. All these philosophers in Savatthi are disagreeing with one another and saying that their own point of view is the only correct one because they think the little bit of the truth that they know is the whole truth. But if we have an understanding of the whole truth, using the Dharma teachings of the great wisdom, then we can see the real, complete elephant – we can see things as they really are. And then we won't need to engage in endless opinions and disagreements.'

Questions

1. Why was it difficult for the blind people to know what an elephant was like?
2. Why did the Buddha tell his followers this story about the blind people's different opinions about an elephant?
3. Can you think of examples of arguments where everyone thought they were right and everyone else was wrong?
4. Are there some important, general things about which no-one can have different opinions because they really are true, always and for everyone?

Dharma Issues:

- *The proliferation of different views and opinions, based on ignorance of ultimate reality*
- *Knowledge of ultimate reality as the integration of fragmented experiences into a totality*

Based on the three Nanatitthia Suttas, in The Udana, Buddhist Publication Society, 1997, Suttas 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6