

## A Forest Ride on Wild Elephants: The Philosophy of Wilderness in Buddhism

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### Introduction

‘Going forth’ into the forest holds deep philosophical significance in religious traditions that embark on the ideal of renunciation as a path to spiritual freedom. In *Vedic* poems, seers are inspired by forces in the forest; likewise the spiritual teaching and practices of Buddhism unfold in the wilderness with Buddha’s journey to enlightenment attained at the foot of a graceful *Bodhi* tree. This pronouncement placed the *Bodhi* tree as an essential symbol of Buddhist worship. Similarly, the elephant evolved as central to Buddhist iconography and spiritual teaching. Essential philosophy of the Buddha is illustrated through the images and characters of elephants. Buddha and the early Buddhist writers effectively utilized the images of forest and elephants to construct a coherent philosophy and to refine methods for training Buddhist monks and nuns. This paper examines the intricate relationship of the forest and elephants to monks and nuns embarking on their spiritual journey and the expression of this process in the philosophical development of Buddhism. It argues that observing the behavior and character of untamed and tamed elephants in the wild provided invaluable inspiration for Buddha’s disciples to develop training methods for the spiritual quest.

### Leaving home and leaving bonds

In Buddhism the aim is to attain enlightenment by overcoming the karmic continuity of body and mind that is bound with *Samara*, the worldly life. In Buddhist writings, *samsara* is equated with home because familial ties inevitably keep one bound to the cycle of rebirth, as opposed to renunciation, which leads one directly to *Nibbana*. For ascetics, desires of the mind and body have always been the hook to worldly life, a state which Buddha experienced as painful. The Buddhist critique of an untamed body and

mind originates from its spiritual solution to the problem of *dukkha*. Buddha outlines four noble truths: life is *dukkha* (pain or suffering), *samudaya* (the origin of suffering), *nirodha* (cessation of suffering), and *magga* (a prescribed way leading to the cessation of suffering). To overcome pain, Buddhism suggests, one should examine the causes of pain, and find an effective way to root it out. Pain arises from cravings or desires, particularly from sensual pleasures. Desire of the four nutriments—ordinary material food, contact between our sense-organs and the external world, consciousness, and mental volition—deepen our attachment to this world which is not permanent (Rahula 1973).

### Buddhism in the wilderness

Living in the wilderness is a synonym for the renunciation of worldly bonds in Buddhist texts assisting monks and nuns to leave home and commence their spiritual journey. Buddhist writings of the *Theragatha* (Norman 1971) and *Therigatha* (Norman 1969) provide rich descriptions of isolated forest abodes where monks and nuns dwelt in search of insight. Images of trees, animals, reptiles and birds are all used in Buddhist texts to communicate meaning. Though family activities are deemed rewarding, they leave nuns without a larger goal, providing them only with experience of a ‘low life’ (*Theri*. V. 18, 80). The tranquility of the forest unfastens their ties of worldly life and encourages them to reflect on the origin of sensual craving. For others, meditation at the foot of a tree reassured and elevated, releasing apprehension and healing the mind (*Theri*. V. 24,298). Climbing mountains and sitting steadfast on a rock induced moments of deep contemplation undoing the knot of desires. Streaming water is also a powerful metaphor,

Having washed my feet, I paid attention to the waters; and seeing the foot-water come

to the low land from the high land (flowing downhill), then I concentrated my mind, like a noble thoroughbred horse (*Theri*. V. 114-115).

Overcoming desire and achieving a homeless state is the ultimate goal of forest dwelling monks and nuns. Wise men, Cāpā argues, ‘leave their sons, and their relatives, and their wealth; great horses go forth, like an elephant having broken his fastening’ (*Theri*. V. 301).

There are numerous references to forest, mountains, rocks, trees, groves, wild flowers, animals, birds and rain in the monk’s *Theragatha*. The beauty of the forest delights monks, but it is a different delight from that enjoyed in worldly life. The splendors of the forest teach monks that human perception of beauty, wealth and power is illusionary. They are led to question the nature of finding happiness in impermanent things, and to delight in simple things such as sala and bamboo groves, things without any possessive claim on them (*Thag*. V. 115, 119, 127, 177, 528, 852, 998, 1134, 1135). Climbing steep mountains and sitting in a meditative posture on a rock prepares a monk for deep concentration; assisting in cultivating the determination and firmness necessary for inner spiritual work (*Thag*. V. 115, 145, 466, 887, 925, 991, 1000, 1091). Meditating on an elevated rock provides monks with an eagle’s view of the calming beauty of the forest and clear sight of the rising sun, an impression that not only elevates the mind but wraps the body in the sun’s warmth.

Though forests give joy to monks, groves can be invaded by rutting elephants and other animals; mistakes in the forest can risk the lives of nuns and monks. The *Anagata-bhayani Sutta* advises monks to be aware of five types of dangers: snake or scorpion bites, injury or illness, wild beasts, criminals and vicious non-human spirits. Although wild beasts can be dangerous, observing an animal’s capacity for caring and nurturing can reverse the fear of animals learned at home. The *Theragatha* argues that forest dwelling is only helpful if a student associates with the right people, who will auger insight and right knowledge. The *Arañña Sutta* explains that

monks must cultivate four qualities: ‘thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of non-ill will, thoughts of harmlessness, make a discerning person, not a dull, drooling idiot’ (AN 5.98). Cultivation of these qualities diminishes the need for aggressive pursuit of personal gain and deflates false a sense of self; it smoothes the process of transformation from narrow, illusionary individuality to higher consciousness. Thus the forest opens windows from which young monks and nuns can cultivate new awareness. The novelty of the living forest evokes perceptions that facilitate the road to *Nibbana*.

#### *Taming desire and the mind*

Targeting evil desires that destroy self control is the supreme task of every spiritual warrior. Unlike external political warfare, ceaseless spiritual battle is both internal and external. The *Dhammapada* draws on the image of a relentless warrior elephant in battle:

As an elephant in the battle  
Bears the arrows shot from a bow,  
I will endure insult;  
For many people have poor self-control  
(*The Dhammapada*, 320).

In Buddhist texts the image of the demon *Mara* mounted on a powerful elephant is carefully conceptualized to caution against the invisible but frightful enemy. Consequently, war in the mind is continuous, relentless and often arises unannounced. The formidable ‘king of death,’ *Mara*, who lives and flourishes in every thought and act of desire must be, totally annihilated (*Thag*.V. 794- 817).

To alert young monks and nuns, the Buddhist texts use fearful analogies, metaphors and similes. Words such as ‘poisonous snake’, ‘snake head’, ‘great poison’ and ‘swords’ describe human desire and reveal the gravity of *Mara*’s ambush (*Theri*. V,451, 488, 489, 491). Throughout the texts a battle cry raised against dangerous sensual pleasures unfurls in the words of monks to show the unpredictable nature of pleasure and its hazards (*Thera*, V. 93, 116). Nuns also express worries about devastating desires.

Sela: sensual pleasures are like swords and stakes; the elements of existence are a chopping block for them; what you call delight in sensual pleasure is not “non Delight” for me. Everywhere enjoyment of pleasure is defeated; the mass of darkness (of ignorance) is torn asunder; thus know, evil one, you are defeated, death (*Theri*, V. 58 –59).

Buddhism argues that real death is not death of the body but of the desire that kills awakening in all beings. The site of battle against *Mara* and his elephant must therefore be chosen carefully to provide the best advantage for young spiritual warriors. *Mara* chooses worldly life (home) as his battle site, but Buddha knows *home* is futile for young students and extols the forest as the right place. An isolated forest far from home is absolutely essential to achieve insight.

The story of a wise tusker (bull elephant) in the *Naga Sutta Sutta* elegantly evokes the importance of living in isolation in a forest. The tusker in this story fed only from unbroken blades of grass and branches of trees. He became ‘irritated, upset, and disgusted’ when he saw other elephants devour the trees; he was again ‘irritated, upset, and disgusted’ when he saw herds stir up the mud in the water while they drank and bathed; and once more became ‘irritated, upset, and disgusted’ when the cow elephants banged up their bodies against him in the water. He contemplated, ‘what if I live alone far away from these jumbled herds where I feel free from unnecessary destruction or disruptions?’ The tusker went to the Parileyyaka, a secluded forest, and unexpectedly found the Buddha at the foot of a *sala*-tree. He realized that Buddha had also left his community of monks and nuns to stay alone for a while to contemplate. The *Naga Sutta* concludes with the words of the tusker and Buddha.

Then the Lord, on observing his own solitude, understood with his mind the thought in the mind of that bull elephant, and uttered on that occasion this inspired utterance:

*This unites mind with mind,  
The perfected one and the bull elephant  
With tusks as long as chariot-poles:  
That each delights in being alone in the  
forest*

(Naga Sutta, Ud 4.5, [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org). 1998).

Even though enlightened, Buddha leaves his disciples occasionally for the quiet of the forest. Buddha and the tusker thus identify each other’s need for solitude and contemplation.

### *Taming mind and taming elephant*

Developing spiritual strategies by observing wild elephants is a captivating aspect of Buddhist writing. Elephants are capable of friendship, loyalty, caring and working as a team, making intelligent decisions to protect their herds. Monks also observed that these massive animals can be extremely treacherous when they lose their temper but by using proper methods these intelligent animals could be trained and tamed. Once this precious insight was gained, monks begin to compare the control of a wild elephant with controlling the human mind. Taming elephants becomes a central Buddhist analogy for taming passions. The monk Kula explains, like ‘canal-makers lead water, arrow-makers bend the bow, and carpenters bend wood, men who practice good vows tame the mind’ (*Thag*. V. 19). Training deep seated human emotions such as fear, anger, lust and hatred is considered to be as difficult as taming a raging elephant. Like a mahout with his hook, a teacher must use right methods to control the wayward emotions of a student.

I saw an elephant on the bank of the river, having come up after plunging in. A man, taking a hook, requested the elephant, “Give me your foot.” The elephant stretched forth its foot; the man mounted the elephant. Seeing the untamed tamed, gone under the control of the man, I then concentrated my mind, to the forest for the purpose indeed (*Theri*, V. 48-50).

Of all the treacherous pleasures for monks, lust for women and sexual pleasure are considered the most dangerous in Buddhism. The most frightening concern for a student monk is that sexual pleasure can lead to procreation and family bonding. The stories of Candana, Rajadatta, Kulla, and Sabbakama in the Theragatha

describe how their battle against sexual passion was dangerously troubling. Confronted by numerous 'failing' monks, Buddha developed a daring technique, known as the burial ground meditation. In extreme cases, the Buddha took 'back peddling' monks to a burial ground and asked them to meditate on decomposing bodies; in this way he taught the impermanence of an attractive body (*Thera*, V. 393–394).

Fighting forceful passions is compared to fighting the will of an uncontrollable elephant and is vital to the spiritual journey. The *Tharagatha* argues, 'As a skillful elephant trainer restrained savagery by his hook, so he by meditation suffers not his thoughts to wander away from his exercise' (*Thag*. V. 113). This inner battle to overcome desires is a personal journey as the *Theragatha* suggests, 'He who was hard to tame is tamed by (self) taming' (*Thag*. 8, 689). Meditation is Buddha's hook against *Mara* in his student's minds. Nagavagga Sutta concludes, 'Formerly this mind wandered about as it liked, where it wished and according to its pleasure, but now I shall thoroughly master it with wisdom as a mahout controls with his ankus [hook] an elephant in rut [musth]' (Nagavagga, 326).

### **White elephants and enlightenment**

Elephants are recorded in social and political life in Asian history, and descriptions of capturing large numbers of elephants to build an infantry, and seizing the feet of elephants of a fleeing enemy, are not uncommon. *Culavamsa* show how the political and military power of kings is dependent on them possessing excellent elephants (Geiger 2003). Training an elephant to follow a mahout's commands was necessary for its effective role in social and political life. Although the elegant analogy of taming elephants and the human mind gives an aesthetic edge to Buddhist writings, the authors recognize that all earthly male elephants go through cycles of musth when, driven by sexual passion, they behave in an unruly fashion. Higher levels of testosterone give them an advantage over other male elephants as they have a readiness to fight to death. A mahout's nightmare is his elephant in musth failing to recognize him. Acknowledging this behavior,

Buddhism unites the unruly musth elephant with the evil king *Mara*. This conceptualization shows that the battle against the field of passion is not easy.

It is in this context that an ideal white elephant with a perfection of right temperament, mind and compassion emerges as a powerful image in Buddhist texts. Plato describes the perfect images of imperfect things in the world of forms; in Buddhist writing the quest is to define and attain perfection. Buddhism places moral and spiritual qualities in an opposing dynamic continuum in which all living beings journey from untamed to tamed life, from worldly life (imperfection) to enlightenment (perfection). This continuum is illustrated with *Mara's* musth elephant on the left (imperfection); earthly gray male elephants in the middle (potential to be tamed); and the perfect white elephant on the right. This image of a sacred white elephant embodying love and compassion illustrates the significance of perfection toward which one must strive.

Descriptions of divine white elephants are in striking contrast to the character and strength of other gray elephants. Unlike gray male elephants, the white elephants in the *Jataka* stories possess a balanced disposition and represent divine qualities. The noble elephant in the *Alinacitta Jataka* story never urinates or defecates in the water like other noble living beings, and even its dung smells sweet! The story of Guatama Buddha descending from Tusita heaven to earth as a white elephant born as a human stands above all. The birth of Gautama Buddha unfolds with the auspicious dream of his mother Queen Mayadevi. In her dream, a young shining white elephant with six tusks holding a lotus flower in his silvery trunk enters her body. From this powerful story of Buddha's conception the white elephant evolved to become a great spiritual sign or symbol deeply rooted in Indian mythology.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship of nature in Buddhist philosophy is so strong that one cannot imagine the flourishing development of early Buddhism outside the realm of the forest and wildlife. Of all the animals in the forest referred to in Buddhist writings, elephants have a great



philosophical significance as well as a special spiritual status. As we have seen, a most striking part of this discourse is that Buddha is associated with elephants at many levels. *Mara's* elephant is the opposite nature of Buddha in the mind of a student. Buddha is described as a mahout who tames the passionate and dangerous mind of his students. The idea of Buddha using meditation as a hook to tame the mind of a student is compared with a mahout's use of a hook to control an elephant. Finally, Buddha's life is exemplified as that of a white elephant through identification, 'You have the name "elephant" blessed one; you are the best seer of seers'. Buddhism not only elevates elephants beyond the natural and human realm but also argues that all beings are equal and can progress to superior potential: the enlightenment. Consequently, the untamed, tamed and enlightenment are a potential in all living being who strive for *Nibbana* and travel the same journey as noble beings who have overcome worldly life.

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Elephant painting at the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand.  
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini