

THE SADNESS OF THE WORLD

If you could, for a moment, imagine that you hear – or almost feel – a great deep, heavy, soft, swishing sound, then you could imagine what it felt like the day the elephant came wandering down through the busy market.

The animal had become separated from its keeper and was lost. It was a gentle-mannered elephant and meant no harm, nor was it filled with rage against men. But it became very hungry, and began to take huge amounts of food from the market stalls, thus angering the vendors. Yet none of them knew how to capture or ride an elephant unaided, even if it would have let them mount it. There was furious discussion as the elephant lumbered through the market causing havoc to mountains of mangoes, hills of chilis, bins of bananas, piles of peanuts, and so on.

Eventually a young man who had a very high opinion of himself boasted that he would capture the elephant. He said if each merchant would pay him a sum of money, he would take the beast away, and through desperation they agreed to this. The young man ran ahead of the elephant and climbed onto the rickety tin roof of the chai-seller's booth. When the elephant came close, the man launched himself onto its back.

Curiously, the elephant did not at once dislodge him. It was used to being ridden, and indeed expected the man to give him the usual kicks and commands to guide him. The young man, however, knew nothing of this, and had no idea how to control the elephant. Instead, he crowed to the crowd, "Look at me! Hah! I'm up here controlling the elephant while all of you are down there afraid!"

"Just get him out of here," they cried. "He's ruining our business!"

The young man kicked the elephant, but the elephant did not understand what he wanted. The young man shouted, but he didn't know the correct combination of words and kicks, and he didn't have a goad either. Moreover, his personal vibrational level was disturbing to the elephant. He did not exude that calm controlling manner that it was used to in its master. After a while, the elephant got tired of the kicking screaming beast on its back, and unceremoniously dumped him onto the ground.

The merchants could not help but laugh, although their problem was as acute as ever. When he had regained his breath, the young man stood up angrily. Even though his body only had a few bruises, his pride was severely wounded. "I'll show you!" he yelled, but it was unclear whether he was speaking to the elephant or to the crowd. He ran to the booth of the man who sold the pitch torches that farmers used to burn the fields and frighten away predators. Grabbing one of them, he set it alight from the cooking fire under a pot of chicken, and marched fiercely back toward the elephant, who had been ambling calmly down the row.

He whirled the flaming brand around his head and thrust it violently toward the elephant's trunk. The elephant – as all animals do in the presence of fire – panicked completely. It

trumpeted in fear, flapped its enormous ears, tried to turn in the narrow alley. With not much room to maneuver, it flailed its trunk left and right, and dealt an enormous blow to the young man, whose torch flew into the straw underfoot and instantly started what quickly turned into a general conflagration. The elephant rampaged through the market trampling everything in his way, and the fire followed close behind. People ran, screamed, fell, were trampled or burned. Most did escape, but it was a mad scene from the depths of a nightmare.

By nightfall the elephant was far far away, the fire had burned itself out taking most of the market with it, and four people lay dead. The young man who had caused the havoc did not die, though he had a broken arm and some serious burns.

Word spread quickly that it had been his pride and anger which had ignited within him and escaped into the larger field outside his body and soul. The fire was felt to have been an evil which had exuded from the young man and destroyed those buildings and goods and people within his vicinity. Indeed, there were those who ventured the opinion that the elephant itself had not been a real elephant, but had rather been the gross part of the young man's character that he should have been able to tame were it not for his ignorance and pride. Someone said the reason the phantom elephant had eaten so much fruit was an indication that the young man's life had not borne any fruit, and several people nodded their heads at that. They weren't sure if he could be rehabilitated, or if his inner beast had been released and could not now be re-tamed, but through their concern and forgiveness a collection was taken up for his medical care in any event.

After some months the young man's body had healed, yet he lay almost as if in a coma. His spirit was unwilling to emerge and see the harm he had caused, so it dwelt under his consciousness like a fish just under the surface of the water. It swam back and forth like the turning of his eyes under his closed eyelids.

Yet there did come a day, nearly a year after the disaster, when he awoke. For some reason, he knew instantly everything that had happened, and – although this was clearly impossible – he even knew how many people had died, and who they were, and what injuries had been sustained by whom, and exactly how much money each merchant had lost. He saw a memory-vision of himself like Kali reaping destruction with his whirlwind of fire, and his eyes filled with tears for what he had done and for what was lost.

The young man wept so copiously for seventy days that his nurses had to change his pillow every few hours, hanging the wet ones out to dry in the sun. He wept so much that the monsoons were delayed, as he had taken all the water from the clouds. The people knew that if they wished their rains to come they must stop his crying, so they resorted to all sorts of tricks. They promised that he was forgiven, yet he wept even harder. They said they would set him up in a little business so he could carry on with his life, but this just increased his guilt and shame, and he continued to weep. They brought jesters to make him laugh, but still his eyes poured tears. No one knew what to do until finally someone said, "Let's take him to see the elephants. Perhaps if he is shocked enough he will stop crying."

This sounded cruel, but no one had a better suggestion.

The next day they piled themselves and the young man into a fleet of rickshaws and went out to the corral where the mahouts kept a herd of elephants that sometimes worked in the forest clearing trees. As they drove, the young man poured forth so many tears that the road turned to mud behind them. Even when they approached the corral he could hardly see the elephants for the waters that filled him.

The girl who had suggested the excursion took the young man's hand and led him from the rickshaw to the fencing around the corral. The elephants were uneasy with the visitors, but were chained to stumps inside the corral, and several of their mahouts were keeping watch for trouble. One of the animals was near enough to the fence that anyone standing there could have reached out and touched it. This was a large female, who was rocking forward and backward, forward and backward, as elephants in captivity sometimes do.

The young man stood and looked at her through his tears. "She seems sad," he said to himself. And immediately, at the very moment he entered into the sadness of the elephant, he felt himself enter into the sadness of the entire world, and his tears stopped. He realized in that very instant that the sadness of the world is too great a thing to cry about, and that tears could never wash it away. Inside his being, the fish of his soul began to swim freely again, and waves of pity lapped at the shores where finally his pride had waded in and drowned.

In the years that followed, the sun shone, the rains came, the earth turned. Elephants bore their burdens, and the young man bore his. The young girl became a woman, farmers burned their stubble and chased away predators, the chai seller sat in the market place all day long. The soul of the earth swam under the sea and watered the clouds.