

Parable and Simile of the Elephant as Seen in Pali Tipitaka

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ABSTRACT

Atha kho, bhikkhave, so rājā yena te jaccandhā tenupasaṅkami; upasaṅkamtvaṃ te jaccandhe etadavoca— ‘dīḥho vo, jaccandhā, hatth’āti? ‘Evaṃ, deva, dīḥho no hatth’āti. ‘Vadetha, jaccandhā, k’diso hatth’āti? “Yehi, bhikkhave, jaccandhehi hatthissa s’saṃ dīḥhaṃ ahoṣi, te evamaṃhaṃsu ‘ediso, deva, hatth’ā seyyathāpi kumbho’āti.

Every child in India is familiar with the story of the blind men and the elephant. Though the significance of the parable given by the Buddha to explain reality is not understood or known to many the story of the blind men and the elephant has become a common moral story for children. This is the famous perception about ‘seeing reality according to our own understanding and not reality as it is’. What we forget to learn from this is ‘how we fight for what we think is reality.’

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.

This is the truth and the truth has crossed the borders of India and Pali literature and has become the household story without awareness of its source. In the same way the simile of the elephant used by the Buddha has also reached the masses. In Culhatthipadopama sutta of Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha gave the simile of the elephant’s footprint to understand the dhamma step by step. Using the analogy of an elephant tracker tracking down a big bull elephant, the Buddha explains how a disciple arrives at a complete conclusion of truth.

This paper will try to bring out the parable and simile of the elephant used by the Buddha to teach the dhamma and how those parables or similes have become household stories even when the dhamma was lost in India.

Keywords: *parable, simile, Pali Tipitaka*

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