

DHARMA REFLECTION

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Some monks said to the Buddha: "There are a number of recluses, brahmans, and wanderers of various sects, living around Savatthi. And they are of various views. There are some who assert and hold the view: "The world is eternal; only this is true, any other (view) is false." There are some who assert: "The world is not eternal; only this is true, any other (view) is false." There are some who assert: "The world is finite... The world is infinite... The life-principle and the body are the same... The life-principle and the body are different..." And they lived quarrelsome, disputatious, and wrangling, wounding each other with verbal darts, saying: "Dhamma is like this, Dhamma is not like that! Dhamma is not like this, Dhamma is like that."

The Buddha replied, "The wanderers of other sects are blind, unseeing. They do not know what is beneficial, they do not know what is harmful. They do not know what is Dhamma, they do not know what is not Dhamma. Not knowing what is beneficial and what is harmful, not knowing what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma, they are quarrelsome... saying: 'Dhamma is like this!... Dhamma is like that!'"

"A former king of Savatthi once addressed a certain man: 'Come now, my good man, bring together all those persons in Savatthi who have been blind from birth.'

"'Yes, your majesty,' that man replied, and after rounding up all the blind people in Savatthi, he approached the king and said, 'All the blind people in Savatthi have been brought together, your majesty.'

"'Now, my man, show the blind people an elephant.'

"'Very well, your majesty,' the man replied to the king, and he presented an elephant to the blind people, saying, 'This, blind people, is an elephant.'

"To some of the blind people he presented the head of the elephant, saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented an ear of the elephant, saying, 'This is an elephant.' To some he presented a tusk... the trunk... the body... the foot... the hindquarters... the tail... the tuft at the end of the tail, saying, 'This is an elephant.'

"Then, bhikkhus, the man, having shown the elephant to the blind people, went to the king and said, 'The blind people have been shown the elephant, your majesty. Do now

what you think is suitable.' Then the king approached those blind people and said, 'Have you been shown the elephant?'

"Yes, your majesty, we have been shown the elephant.'

"Tell me, blind people, what is an elephant like?'

"Those blind people who had been shown the head of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a water jar.' Those blind people who had been shown the ear of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a winnowing basket.' Those blind people who had been shown the tusk of the elephant replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a plowshare.' Those blind people who had been shown the trunk replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a plow pole.' Those blind people who had been shown the body replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a storeroom.' Those blind people who had been shown the foot replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a post.' Those blind people who had been shown the hindquarters replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a mortar.' Those blind people who had been shown the tail replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a pestle.' Those blind people who had been shown the tuft at the end of the tail replied, 'An elephant, your majesty, is just like a broom.'

"Saying 'An elephant is like this, an elephant is not like that! An elephant is not like this, an elephant is like that!' they fought each other with their fists."