The Elephant Hunter

July 17, 2025

There’s a story in the Canon. A Brahmin goes to see the Buddha. He’s very impressed. He comes back home, and on the way back home, he runs into a friend. He tells the friend, “I’ve just been to see the Buddha. He’s pretty amazing. He’s really awakened.” The friend says, “How do you know that?” And the first one says, “I see other people coming, trying to do the same.” “They disprove the Buddha’s teachings. They listen to his Dhamma, and they’re converted.” That’s a sign of an awakened person. Just as when you go into the forest and you see the footprints of an elephant, you know that that’s an elephant, a big, bald elephant, because the footprints are large. So the second friend says, “In that case, I’d like to meet with the Buddha someday.” So he goes to see the Buddha, and he tells him what his friend had said. And the Buddha says, “That’s the wrong use of the elephant foot simile. Would you like to know the right use?” The Brahmin says, “Of course.” And the Buddha says, “Suppose there’s an expert elephant hunter. He goes into the woods and he sees large footprints, but he doesn’t jump to the conclusion that those must be the footprints of a bald elephant. Why is that? Because there are females with large feet. It might be theirs. But the prince looked likely, so he follows them. He comes across some scratch marks way up in the trees, but he doesn’t jump to the conclusion that those must be scratch marks made by a big, bald elephant. Why is that? Because there are tall females with tusks. It might be theirs. But again, it looks promising, so he follows the scratch marks. Finally he gets to a clearing, and there’s the big, bald elephant. That’s when he sees the elephant directly. That’s when he knows that he’s got the big, bald elephant that he wants. Then the Buddha makes a comparison. He says,”You practice the teachings, and you get into the four stages of right concentration. Those are like footprints. Think about that.” For those of us who haven’t gotten into right concentration yet, we’re still wandering around in the forest. We haven’t seen any footprints at all. Someone tells us there are footprints, and we say, “Well, that sounds good. Let’s give it a try.” But the footprints correspond to the four jhanas. Then the scratch marks correspond to the different psychic powers you can gain from the jhanas. Still, they’re not proof that the Buddha’s awakened, that his teaching is true. But it’s likely, so you follow them. Finally, you gain your first glimpse of the deathless, what they call the Dhamma-I. You see that there really is something deathless that can be attained through following the path. That’s when you know that the Buddha is awakened, because you’ve had your taste of awakening too. So you hear that the Buddha’s talking about the property of conviction. Conviction isn’t confirmed until you’ve gained awakening. But that means you have to commit yourself to the path first. So even before you’ve seen the footprints and seen the scratch marks, he’s asking that you commit to the path because it seems reasonable. And because it’s a responsible thing to do. People have trouble with the teaching on karma and rebirth. But the Buddha’s basically saying that his teaching on karma is different from the teachings of karma that were given back in those days. In his case, it’s all about the power you have to shape your experience. Even the Jains who taught karma, taught that you were totally determined by your past karma. There wasn’t much you could do right now except just accept it and endure it. When there was pain, you had to sit with the pain and not react. That was going to burn off your old karma, they said. And for them, the main karma was your physical karma, what you do with your body, what you say with your speech. But the Buddha’s saying, no, you start with your intentions. The quality of your intentions determines the results. The quality of the results. In other words, he’s asking you to take responsibility from the very beginning with your intention. What do you intend to do? What do you intend to accomplish? What do you expect will be the results of your actions in terms of harming yourself or harming others? And then you develop the qualities that you need in order to test his teachings. So there’s an element of trust, an element of giving the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. And some people say, well, you can’t really commit yourself until you know for sure that something is true. But how many things do you know without committing? And the Buddha himself, when he tested different teachings, he looked to see what qualities were required. That’s when he studied under the two Ajahns. They required conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment. So he developed those qualities. And when he found that the results were not what he’d hoped for, he moved on. But he committed himself first, then he reflected. That’s what the Buddha asked you to do. Conviction is basically taking on as a working hypothesis the teachings that you are responsible for your actions. And the quality of your intentions determines the quality of the results. But simply good intentions are not good enough. You have to learn from your mistakes. Because sometimes you act on good intentions. It turns out there’s some delusion involved in what you think is good. When you see that the results are not good, you have to turn around and look back at your intentions. You take responsibility. This is what the Buddha is asking you all the way along the line. You take responsibility. Which is why conviction is a virtue. It’s a sense of you take on the teaching that your actions give results and the actions go beyond just this lifetime. There is rebirth. He says he can’t prove it to you. But you will find that if you take these principles on, conviction, then… He doesn’t use the word “working hypothesis,” but that’s what he means. You find that you’re a better person. You’re more responsible for your actions. Now think about what kind of person would find that argument convicting. Someone who has some integrity. Someone who is happy to take on responsibility. Which is why conviction is a virtue. It’s not just a matter of saying, “I believe these facts are true or not true.” You’re taking on responsibility. And the Buddha is placing some trust in you. In the principle that anyone who follows the path develops the qualities of mindfulness, concentration, discernment that are required by the path. They’re going to come to the same conclusion that he did. Which is not just believing what he had to say, but to actually find what he found. That there is a doubtless element that can be attained. It may take more than one lifetime. But you find it. And that’s what guarantees for you. That’s what confirms your conviction. I was reading something the other day, where they’re saying that the Buddha simply asked for conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And asked that you follow the precepts. And that constitutes stream entry, which would be the first level of awakening. That’s really dumbing down the path. Because what would you be basing your conviction on? Just that it makes sense. And as the Buddha said, though, just because something makes sense doesn’t mean it’s true. It requires further testing. And he didn’t just say it was conviction in the triple gem. He said it was confirmed conviction in the triple gem. And that comes only with the Deathless. Because everything else you know in life falls under the pattern of the dependent-core arising. Where things that you see in the six senses, even things you directly experience, are colored by the perceptions you’ve had in the past, the thoughts you’ve had in the past. So there’s always some bias in the ordinary sense of perception. But the awareness of awakening, that’s something outside. As he said, it’s not known through the six senses. So it’s not biased like our ordinary knowledge that’s known through the six senses. That’s the only kind of knowledge that’s really reliable. That’s the elephant hunter seeing the bull elephant directly, not mediated through footprints or scratch marks. So it’s important that you understand what the Buddha is talking about when he says conviction, especially when he says confirmed conviction. Now conviction is a virtue. That you are responsible for shaping your present moment experience. This is another area where he differed from the Jains. They said everything you experience is determined by the past. He said if that were the case, there’d be no path to the end of suffering. This is in the present moment, because everything you would do in the present moment was already determined. So the people who reject the teaching on karma, thinking that it’s teaching determinism, really misunderstand the Buddha. It was one of those beliefs, the belief in determinism, that he actually actively would go out and argue with other people about. Because he said it’s so wrong, it’s so obstructive. to putting an end to suffering. What he taught was there are tendencies that come from the past karma. But your experience in the present moment is composed of your present intentions as they take that raw material from the past. Which means that you can develop skills in the present moment. So no matter what the raw material is, you can make something good out of it. Like a cook who can make good food out of bad ingredients. So the Buddha is asking you, as he said, “Open the doors of the Atlas. Let those with ears show their conviction.” He’s asking you to take responsibility for your actions. That’s a call that appeals to people of integrity. So he’s expecting you to have the integrity to take on this teaching and give it a fair test. And he trusts that you will, you can do that. Now whether you will do that, that’s up to you. But he trusts that you have the capability of doing that. And so it’s a virtue to take on that call. The call to conviction. And carry it through. To find within yourself the footprints and the scratch marks. And then finally, the big elephant. Only then will you know how true his teachings are. And your conviction will have been confirmed.

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