



The blind men and the elephant

There was once a battle between learned men over how the world came to be. Every scholar was convinced that what he himself claimed was the truth. Every scholar thought the opinion of the other scholars was nonsense. They got into a fight about it. Finally, they went to the Buddha to ask him for advice. Everyone thought they were right. But the Buddha said, "You are like the blind men in the story."

The blind men and the elephant

There was a city where all the inhabitants were blind. One day the king came to the city with all his court and army. The king rode an elephant. The blind people in the city were very curious about the elephant and six of them quickly went to meet the king on his elephant, so they could report to their neighbours. They had no idea what the shape and appearance of an elephant was like, so each one tried to find out what kind of animal the elephant was by touch.

The first blind man walked towards the elephant, but fell when he collided with the elephant's sides. "The elephant is a kind of wall of clay that has been baked in the sun," he concluded.

The second blind man felt one of the elephant's tusks, and cried, "What could be so round and sharp? The elephant must be a spear!"

Then the third blind man approached, stretched out his hands to the elephant and accidentally grabbed the elephant's trunk. "Aha," said the third blind man, "an elephant is most like a snake."

Then the fourth blind man reached out and felt the elephant's knee. "It seems clear to me what the elephant most resembles," he said, "The elephant must be a tree!"

The fifth blind man happened to touch an ear of the elephant. He said, "Even for those of us who can't see, it's obvious that an elephant resembles a fan."

The sixth blind man had barely stretched out his hands when he felt the swinging tail, which gave him a teasing nudge as it swung. The man held out his hands to feel it carefully. "I already know," he said, "an elephant is like a rope."

When the men returned to their town, the inhabitants were waiting for them to hear all about the elephant. Each of the men related what he had felt and thought. They all said something different! The men talked louder and louder and tried to drown each other out.

After the Buddha told this story he added:

"You are like those blind men. You see only a small piece of the truth, but you think you have the whole picture."