



The Blind Men and the Elephant

Discuss the title.

Display slide 1 from the Google Slides. Then transition to slide 2: allow some discussion for the question: Have you ever had a disagreement where both people believed they were right?

Introduction to the story.

- Explain that the Buddhist version is the earliest surviving written version; it likely came from oral stories told in Ancient India across the Dharma traditions (a variety of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions).. Later on, the parable spread throughout other cultures and eventually into Western philosophy. (See slide 3.)

Meet the Characters

Using slide 4, discuss the main characters. Allow students to discuss the question with a partner: What happens when someone only knows a small part of the story?

Key Vocabulary

See Slides 5-10

Spend a few minutes discussing each of the words on slides 5-10. Allow students to share examples relating to each of the words.

Pre-Reading

See Slide 11

Discuss the following question: Have you ever disagreed with someone because you saw or experienced something differently? What happened? What did each person believe? Allow students to freely walk around the room discussing this with classmates for two minutes.

During Reading

See Slides 12-14

Allow students to discuss each of the questions shown on slides 12, 13, 14, and 15 as you read. Pause at appropriate times to allow for clarification and reflection.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Post Reading

See Slides 15-17.

Allow students to discuss each of the questions shown on slides 15-17. Consider discussing each question using a whole group approach or a Think-Pair-Share strategy.

Connect to Your Life.

See Slide 18.

Using the provided worksheet, have students draft a response to the Connect to Your Life question.

Extension Activities

- Draw the elephant (from many views).
 - To help students visualize how limited information shapes opinions, have students illustrate what each blind person thought the elephant looked like based on the part they touched.
- Perspective Writing
 - To help students better understand empathy and reflection, have students write a short paragraph from the viewpoint of one blind man describing the elephant, not knowing the rest. (Consider adding a second paragraph where they learn about the whole elephant and reflect on how they felt.)
- Debate Activity:
 - Students are assigned one truth (e.g., the elephant is a rope). They prepare and present their arguments. (**See the included worksheet.** Teachers will need to make a copy for each group and park one of the elephant parts before giving students the paper.)
- Create a Class Mural: What is truth?
 - Each student draws or writes their idea of what “truth” means or looks like.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Debate Worksheet: Who Is Right About the Elephant?

Name: _____ Group: _____

Step 1: Prepare Your Argument

What part of the elephant did your group touch?

Head Ear Tusk Trunk Leg Tail

Describe what your character believes the elephant is like:

Why does your character believe this is true?

Write one strong sentence your group will use in the debate:

Step 2: The Debate

Take turns sharing your argument. Listen carefully to what other groups say.

As you listen, write down two other perspectives:

1. Group that touched the _____ says:

2. Group that touched the _____ says:

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Step 3: Reflect

Now that you've heard all sides, do you still think your group was completely right? Why or why not?

What do you think this story teaches about truth or understanding?

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Activity: Making Connections

Step 1: Text-to-Text

Have you read another story where people disagree or misunderstand something because they don't see the whole picture? (Think of fables, tall tales, or even mystery stories.)

What was the story, and how is it similar to this one?

Step 2: Text-to-Self

Have you ever been in a situation where you only knew part of the story? What happened when you learned more?

Step 3: Text-to-World

How does this story remind you of things that happen in the world, like in the news, at school, or in your community?

Optional Extension: Draw a picture showing two people looking at the same thing from different sides—what do they see? Add speech bubbles. (Classroom Adaptation of the Story, “The Blind Men and the Elephant” can be used as a handout)

Classroom Adaptation of the Story (can be used as a handout)

The Blind Men and the Elephant

A Story from the Time of the Buddha

Long ago, the Buddha lived near a city called Sāvattthī. In that city, many wise people liked to debate about the universe. They said things like:

- "The universe has always been here."
- "No, it had a beginning!"
- "The universe is tiny."

The Blind Men and the Elephant

- "No, it goes on forever!"
- "The body and the self are the same."**
- "No, they are different!"

***Note to teacher: **In the ancient Dharma traditions, they realized that although the body is part of what makes us "us", it isn't the whole story. We also have a mind complex, intelligence, consciousness, and life. They theorized that there was a phenomenon that gave rise to the individual consciousness, which they called "self" – as in one's self/myself. So, they discussed and debated whether these things were the same (meaning that when the body died, the self would cease), or whether they were different (so that when the body died, the self would persist in the multiverse/beyond).*

Everyone thought their idea was right, and they argued a lot. One day, some of the Buddha's followers told him about these arguments. The Buddha replied with a story:

The King and the Elephant

Once in Sāvattṭī, a king asked his helper to bring together people who had been blind since birth. When they arrived, the king said, "Show them an elephant."

Each blind person touched a different part of the elephant:

Part Touched	What They Said It Was Like
Head	"A big pot"
Ear	"A fan"
Tusk	"A spear"
Trunk	"A snake"
Side	"A wall"
Leg	"A tree trunk"
Tail	"A rope"
Tip of the Tail	"A brush"

Then they started arguing loudly:

"You're wrong!" – "That's not what an elephant is!" – "I'm right!"

Each person only felt one part, so none of them knew what the whole elephant was really like.

The Buddha said,

"People are like those blind men. When they only understand one small part, they fight over who is right. But to know the whole truth, we must listen, learn, and see more than just one side."

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Moral of the Story:

Don't fight over what you think is true. Everyone sees things differently. Debating is a good thing when done without getting angry, but if we think only our view is right, we will never learn from the other, and we may miss something that expands our views and makes it even better. So, to see the whole picture, we must hear from each other.

The Blind Men and the Elephant

Original Story

The Blind Men and the Elephant (Khuddaka Nikāya, Udāna 6.4)

So I have heard. At one time the Buddha was staying near the city of Sāvattḥī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Now at that time several ascetics and wanderers who followed various worldviews were residing in Sāvattḥī, holding different views, beliefs, and opinions. There were some ascetics who had this doctrine and view: "The cosmos is eternal. This is the only truth, anything else is futile."

Others held views such as the following, each regarding their own view as true: "The cosmos is not eternal" spoke some.

Even others shared, "The cosmos is finite."

Another group said, "The cosmos is infinite."

Someone else shared, "The self and the body are the same thing."

Someone contradicted that saying, "The self and the body are different things."

Other controversies had some people saying, "A realized one still exists after death," while other people asserted, "A realized one no longer exists after death." They were arguing, quarreling, and disputing.

Then several beggars robed up in the morning and, taking their bowls and robes, entered Sāvattḥī for alms. Then, after the meal, when they returned from their round for alms, they went up to the Buddha, bowed, sat down to one side, and told him what was happening.

The Buddha said: "Once upon a time, right here in Sāvattḥī there was a certain king. Then the king addressed a man, 'Please, worthy man, gather all those blind from birth throughout Sāvattḥī and bring them together in one place.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' that man replied. He did as the king asked, then said to him, 'Your Majesty, the blind people throughout Sāvattḥī have been gathered.'

'Well then, my man, show them an elephant.'

'Yes, Your Majesty,' that man replied. He did as the king asked. To some of the blind people he showed the elephant's head, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's ear, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the

The Blind Men and the Elephant

elephant's tusk, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's trunk, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's flank, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's leg, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's thigh, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the elephant's tail, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' To some of them he showed the tip of the elephant's tail, saying, 'Here is the elephant.' Then he approached the king and said, 'Your Majesty, the blind people have been shown the elephant. Please go at your convenience.'

Then the king went up to the blind people and said, 'Have you seen the elephant?'

'Yes, Your Majesty, we have been shown the elephant.'

'Then tell us, what kind of thing is an elephant?'

The blind people who had felt the elephant's head said, 'Your Majesty, an elephant is like a huge pot.'

Those who had felt the ear said, 'An elephant is like a big fan.'

Those who had felt the tusk said, 'An elephant is like a plowshare.'

Those who had felt the trunk said, 'An elephant is like a thick snake.'

Those who had felt the elephant's side said, 'An elephant is like a wall.'

Those who had felt the leg said, 'An elephant is like a pillar or tree trunk.'

Those who had felt the thigh said, 'An elephant is like a mortar.'

Those who had felt the tail said, 'An elephant is like a rope.'

Those who had felt the tip of the tail said, 'An elephant is like a broom or a brush.'

Saying, 'Such is an elephant, not such! Such is not an elephant, such is!' they quarreled.

In the same way, the wanderers are blind. That's why they are arguing. 'Such is Truth, such is not! Such is not Truth, such is!' Some ascetics, it seems, cling to these things. Arguing, they quarrel, the folk who see only one part and not the whole."