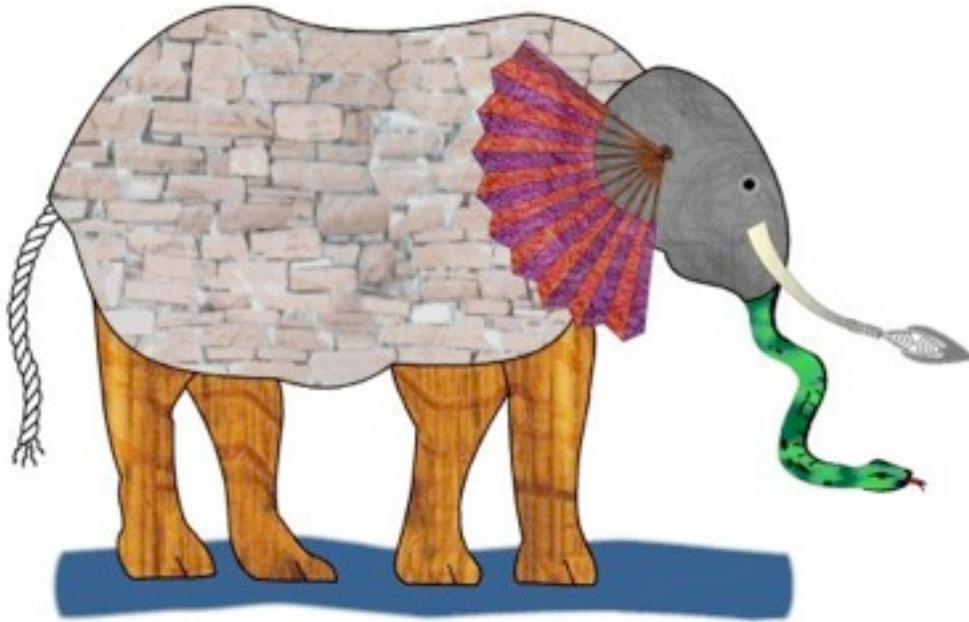


# THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT



**John Godfrey Saxe's ( 1816-1887) version of the famous Indian legend,**

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approach'd the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, -"Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"

The *Third* approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"

The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he,  
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Then, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL.

So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
*And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!*

The original parable originated in China sometime during the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) and goes as follows:

### **"Three Blind Men and an Elephant"**

One day, three blind men happened to meet each other and gossiped a long time about many things. Suddenly one of them recalled, "I heard that an elephant is a queer animal. Too bad we're blind and can't see it."

"Ah, yes, truly too bad we don't have the good fortune to see the strange animal," another one sighed.

The third one, quite annoyed, joined in and said, "See? Forget it! Just to feel it would be great."

"Well, that's true. If only there were some way of touching the elephant, we'd be able to know," they all agreed.

It so happened that a merchant with a herd of elephants was passing, and overheard their conversation. "You fellows, do you really want to feel an elephant? Then follow me; I will show you," he said.

The three men were surprised and happy. Taking one another's hand, they quickly formed a line and followed while the merchant led the way. Each one began to contemplate how he would feel the animal, and tried to figure how he would form an image.

After reaching their destination, the merchant asked them to sit on the ground to wait. In a few minutes he led the first blind man to feel the elephant. With outstretched hand, he touched first the left foreleg and then the right. After that he felt the two legs from the top to the bottom, and with a beaming face, turned to say, "So, the queer animal is just like that." Then he slowly returned to the group.

Thereupon the second blind man was led to the rear of the elephant. He touched the tail which wagged a few times, and he exclaimed with satisfaction, "Ha! Truly a queer animal! Truly odd! I know now. I know." He hurriedly stepped aside.

The third blind man's turn came, and he touched the elephant's trunk which moved back and forth turning and twisting and he thought, "That's it! I've learned."

The three blind men thanked the merchant and went their way. Each one was secretly excited over the experience and had a lot to say, yet all walked rapidly without saying a word.

"Let's sit down and have a discussion about this queer animal," the second blind man said, breaking the silence.

"A very good idea. Very good." the other two agreed for they also had this in mind.

Without waiting for anyone to be properly seated, the second one blurted out, "This queer animal is like our straw fans swinging back and forth to give us a breeze. However, it's not so big or well made. The main portion is rather wispy."

"No, no!" the first blind man shouted in disagreement. "This queer animal resembles two big trees without any branches."

"You're both wrong." the third man replied. "This queer animal is similar to a snake; it's long and round, and very strong."

How they argued! Each one insisted that he alone was correct. Of course, there was no conclusion for not one had thoroughly examined the whole elephant. How can anyone describe the whole until he has learned the total of the parts.

From:

Kuo, Louise and Kuo, Yuan-Hsi (1976), "Chinese Folk Tales," Celestial Arts: 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030, pp. 83-85.

These authors note: "Although this folktale is classified as being of Chinese derivation. India has a similar one, and so does Africa. However, the philosophical note is typically Chinese even though the basic thought is universal; When a person is opinionated or blind to his limitations because of insufficient knowledge or smug mentality, he is as blind as if he had no eyesight."

The links below are to other versions of the tale:

The Jainist version: [Elephant and the Blind Men](#)

The Buddhist version from the Udana 68-69: [Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant](#)

The Sufi/Hindu version from Tales from Masnavi, Jalal al-Din Rumi translated by A.J. Arberry: [The Elephant in the dark, on the reconciliation of contrarities](#)

The Discordian version by Reverend Loveshade: [Five Blind Men and an Elephant](#)

A nicely illustrated version with the Saxe poem: [Blind Men and the Elephant](#)

If anyone has the African version, please let me know.

Comparisons of various versions of the parable can be found in the [Wikipedia](#)

Another page with some comparisons: [The Blind Men and the Elephant in Islamic Thought](#)

Other interesting links:

[Training Circus Elephants](#): an example of [Learned Helplessness](#)

Found this quote: "With notoriously bad eyesight, forest elephants tend to follow their trunks, using the appendage as a blind person might use fingertips on a stranger's face-to identify, visualize, gather clues, communicate." This might be the [ultimate blind cane](#). i.e. ([Electronic Travel Aid for the Blind](#) )

From: Belt, D., Fay, M., Nicols, M., (1999). "[Forest Elephants](#)," National Geographic V195(2), pp.100-113.