

Udāna 6:4 Titttha Sutta (Sectarians)

(2) The Blind Men and the Elephant

On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvattthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Now at that time a number of ascetics and brahmins, wanderers of other sects, were living around Sāvattthī. They held various views, beliefs, and opinions, and propagated various views. And they were quarrelsome, disputatious, wrangling, wounding each other with verbal darts, saying, "The Dhamma is like this, the Dhamma is not like that! The Dhamma is not like this, the Dhamma is like that!"

Then a number of monks entered Sāvattthī on almsround. Having returned, after their meal they approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and told him what they had seen. [The Blessed One said:]

"Monks, wanderers of other sects are blind and sightless. They do not know what is beneficial and harmful. They do not know what is the Dhamma and what is not the Dhamma, and thus they are so quarrelsome and disputatious.

"Formerly, monks, there was a king in Sāvattthī who addressed a man and asked him to round up all the persons in the city who were blind from birth. When the man had done so, the king asked the man to show the blind men an elephant. To some of the blind men he presented the head of the elephant, to some the ear, to others a tusk, the trunk, the body, a foot, the hindquarters, the tail, or the tuft at the end of the tail. And to each one he said, 'This is an elephant.'

"When he reported to the king what he had done, the king went to the blind men and asked them, 'Tell me, blind men, what is an elephant like?'

“Those who had been shown the head of the elephant replied, ‘An elephant, your majesty, is just like a water jar.’ Those who had been shown the ear replied, ‘An elephant is just like a winnowing basket.’ Those who had been shown the tusk replied, ‘An elephant is just like a plowshare.’ Those who had been shown the trunk replied, ‘An elephant is just like a plow pole.’ Those who had been shown the body replied, ‘An elephant is just like a storeroom.’ And each of the others likewise described the elephant in terms of the part they had been shown.

“Then, 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. And the king was delighted. Even so, monks, are the wanderers of other sects blind and sightless, and thus they become quarrelsome, disputatious, and wrangling, wounding each other with verbal darts.”

(Ud 6:4; 67–69)