

Imaginative Storytelling

Invite members of the group to read through the entirety of “When the Buddha and his Mother were Elephants” silently.

Next, ask for a volunteer to read aloud a specific section of the text, six paragraphs long, which begins with “The elephant went into the forest but he did not eat or drink” and ends with “...I am rejoicing after seeing my son today.” As you read/listen, place the mother elephant’s experience at the center of your attention.

Break up into groups of about two or three. Split the six-paragraph-text into sections that correspond with the number of groups (for example, if there are three groups, split up the text into three sections, with two paragraphs per group).

In your small groups, write a new narrative of your section of the story, telling it from the point of view of the mother elephant. Feel free to reframe it in the first person (where the “I” is the mother elephant), or to use third person, where the narrator has special access to her experience.

Come back to the larger group. In the order of narrative events, invite each small group to read their section of the story.

Reflect together about this activity as a whole. Was it difficult or easy to write the new narrative? How so? What elements of the story shifted when you re-focused in this way? What was it like to hear the story from the point of view of the mother elephant? Did you gain any particular insights?

Questions

Read through the entirety of “When the Buddha was an Elephant” aloud as a group, alternating readers with each paragraph.

Split up into groups of about two or three people, and assign each group one of three characters: the young elephant, the mother elephant and the king of Kashi.

In your small groups, take about five minutes in silence for each person to formulate a question about their assigned character. You may want to write your question down on a piece of paper. The question might come from some element of the narrative that surprised you, or from something that you wish to know more deeply about the character. (For example, if your group is focusing on the king of Kashi, you might ask: What made it possible for the king to change his mind?)

In your small groups, invite someone share their question and for each group member to offer a possible answer to the question. Continue in this way, giving space for each question to be asked and contemplated.

Come back in the larger group. Share any questions/possible answers that were particularly meaningful to you or to your group.

Mirroring Language

Invite participants to read through the entirety of “When the Buddha and his Mother were Elephants” silently.

Split up into groups of about three people. Pass each group a piece of paper with one of the following sections of text at the top:

As he grew up, he waited on his mother with the respect due to a teacher and with love. He gave food and drink to her first, and only afterwards did he eat himself. He routinely cleaned and scrubbed her highborn body using a forest vine. And so that elephant calf grew up, continually waiting on his mother out of his own sense of being taken care of, and out of love, and respect.

“Out of his affection, the king greeted the young elephant with honor and asked him: ‘Greatest of elephants, I honor you in every way, but all the same you languish, grow weak, and do not thrive. I never see any vitality in your skin-color or in your body, I never see any happiness, I never see you with a smile on your face.’ Tell me about it, explain to me how to help you to get over whatever it is. Best of elephants, you are dear to me, pleasing to me. Tell me why you have grown so weak, and never take any food or drink.’

“Then the king said to his chief ministers, ‘Free this young elephant, let him go back to the forest where we captured him. He is someone who cares for his mother, so let him be reunited with her. Don’t let him die here from starvation, turning us into sinners for no reason.’ Thus, by the king’s command, the young elephant was brought to the forest and set free.

Monks, at that time, I was that the young elephant in the forest. Mahaprajapati Gautami was that young elephant’s mother. Just as she had become blind then by crying with grief over me, but after having come close to me, she was no longer blind, in the same way now, she has become blind by crying with grief over me, but after only having come close to me, she is no longer blind.”

In your small groups, read aloud the section of text that has been handed to you. Suppose that this paragraph is meant to teach us something about how to live in the world with and for others. What might that teaching be?

As you discuss possibilities in your group, try to use language from the text, rather than borrowing language from somewhere else. For example, if you have a background in Buddhism, in philosophy, in psychology or some other field, you might be tempted to use language from these fields to explain what is happening in the text. Try to resist this temptation and instead mirror the language that appears in the text itself.

Come back to the larger group and share the teaching(s) that each group discovered about their section of text. Then, discuss the following questions together: Was there one teaching that stood out to your group, or multiple teachings? What was it like to formulate a teaching from the text using “mirroring language”? Is this different from or similar to how you usually read?