

Presented by:
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In honor of Mother's Day, a story about a Mother & son...

THE ELEPHANT AND HIS OLD BLIND MOTHER

Long ago, in the hills of the Himalayas near a lotus pool, the Buddha was once born as a baby elephant. He was a magnificent elephant, pure white with feet and face the color of coral. His trunk gleamed like a silver rope and his ivory tusks curled up in a long arc.

He followed his mother everywhere. She plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from the tall trees and gave them to him. "First you, then me," she said.

Then they rested in the soft muck with their trunks curled together. In the deep shadows of afternoon, the mother elephant rested in the shade of a rose-apple tree and watched her son romp and frolic with the other baby elephants.

The little elephant grew and grew until he was the tallest and strongest young bull in the herd.

And while he grew taller and stronger, his mother grew older and older. Her tusks were yellow and broken and in time she became blind. The young elephant plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from the tall trees and gave them to his dear old blind mother. "First you, then me," he said.

He bathed her in the cool lotus pool among the fragrant flowers. Drawing the sparkling water up in his trunk, he sprayed her over the top of her head and back until she shone. Then they rested in the soft muck with their trunks curled together. In the deep shadows of afternoon, the young elephant guided his mother to the shade of a rose-apple tree. Then he went roaming with the other elephants.

One day a king was hunting and spied the beautiful white elephant. "What a splendid animal! I must have him to ride upon!" So the king captured the elephant and put him in the royal stable. He adorned him with silk and jewels and garlands of lotus flowers. He gave him sweet grass and juicy plums and filled his trough with pure water.

But the young elephant would not eat or drink. He wept and wept, growing thinner each day. "Noble elephant," said the king, "I adorn you with silk and jewels. I give you the finest food and the purest water, yet you do not eat or drink. What will please you?" The young elephant said, "Silk and jewels, food and drink do not make me happy. My blind old mother is alone in the forest with no one to care for her. Though I may die, I will take no food or water until I give some to her first."

The king said, "Never have I seen such kindness, not even among humans. It is not right to keep this young elephant in chains."

Free, the young elephant raced through the hills looking for his mother. He found her by the lotus pool. There she lay in the mud, too weak to move. With tears in his eyes, he filled his trunk with water and sprayed the top of her head and back until she shone. "Is it raining?" she asked. "Or has my son returned to me?" "It is your very own son!" he cried. "The king has set me free!" As he washed her eyes, a miracle happened. Her sight returned. "May the king rejoice today as I rejoice at seeing my son again!" she said.

The young elephant then plucked the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes from a tree and gave them to her. "First you, then me."

"First you, then me" one line, so powerful in its simplicity. Speaks to the idea of selfless giving. It is the idea of moving beyond this ego-centeredness and striving to understand our interconnectedness or interdependence with others and in fact, the entire universe. With this understanding, the act of selfless giving for the welfare of others, giving even more than is required, giving more than of your self, takes root. This selfless service is the very definition of Mother.

"First you, then me". This is unconditional love. It is a love that requires a lot of courage and acceptance. It is a love that expects nothing back in return, no reward for services rendered. A love that does not discriminate between foolish and wise. A love that has no boundaries or limitations. It is the Bodhisattva ideal. It is the enlightened being, out of unconditional love and compassion, that forgoes awakening, until all sentient beings have attained the same awakening. It is Dharmakara Bodhisattva's 18th vow. It is a mother Elephant drawing the water up in her trunk and spraying clean her infant. "First you, then me."

So here we are, on Mother's Day, all recipients of this immense unconditional love. How do we ever begin to repay them? Is plucking the tenderest leaves and sweetest mangoes for our mothers enough? I'm sure if you asked them they would say yes. It just doesn't seem to be enough. The Buddha taught in the sutras that it is not easy to repay your mother for your "precious human birth." In fact, he specifies that even if you carried them on your shoulders for a century, taking good care of them, and allowing them to relieve themselves on you, you would still have a debt to them. That goes way beyond the rather vague Judeo-Christian commandment to honor your parents. It seems like a scenario where Peter Graves has set us up with a "Mission Impossible". I don't have the answer. All I can do is call my Mom every week, listen to her talk about the latest project from her quilting classes, crack wise and make her laugh, prepare dinner for her when she visits, send flowers on her birthday, and tell her with deep sincerity and gratitude that I love her. Oh, and when there is a door, open it for her and say "First you, then me."

Please join me in Gassho,

You know you're young to your Mother when
she wants to hold your hand to cross the road.

You know your Mother is old to you when
you want to hold her hand to cross the road.

You know it's not too late when
you can still cross hand in hand.
Is it not time to guide each other
to cross the sea of Samsara together?