

THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

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Intent of the story

- ✓ *Our thinking, feeling and knowledge are conditioned by our perceptions.*
- ✓ *Our perceptions are conditioned by our culture, and upbringing.*
- ✓ *We have to distrust our uncritical and unexamined perceptions.*
- ✓ *We should be forever questioners, not passive receivers of the truth.*
- ✓ *An unexamined and unquestioned faith is not worth its name.*
- ✓ *We, humans, easily jump from beliefs, opinions, theories and hypothesis to facts.*

The Story

There were four blind men. Many a time, they heard people talking about elephants, how big, how heavy, how mighty they are. Not being able to see any, they decided to experience what an elephant is, how it feels. On one occasion, when an elephant chanced to be brought to the village, they approached it and eagerly began to feel it.

One of the blind men reached out for one of the elephant's legs. He touched it and touched it. It felt strong, firm and solid. He touched it more and more. Then, he said: "Oh! Now, I know what an elephant is! It's like a big, strong, straight pillar."

The second blind man touched the elephant's trunk. He too kept feeling it very carefully. It was supple, flexible with and a hole on its end. Sure of himself he exclaimed: "Yes, now I know what an elephant is. It's like a big hose-pipe, strong, and flexible".

The third blind man reached for one of the tusks. He also carefully felt it and touched it. It was smooth, hard, curved, pointed and strong. He said to himself: "An elephant is like a big, strong, sharp spear".

The fourth blind man happened to hold one of the ears of the elephant. It moved rhythmically right and left giving a lot of breeze. The blind man went on touching it and enjoying the breeze. In the end he said: "Oh! Yes, an elephant is like a fan

"Later on when the four blind men met, full of excitement, they began sharing their perceptions and feelings. One said: "The elephant is like a pillar", the other said, "not at all, it is like a pipe-hose", a third one said: "you are wrong, the elephant is like a big spear", the fourth one shouted: "you are liars! The elephant is like a big, pleasant fan" No one listened to the other three. All

talked, shouted and screamed. None paid attention to anyone. No one made attempts to understand the others' perceptions. They ended by getting angry and quarrelling amongst themselves.

(Old Indian Legend)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING

1. Why did the Blind Men ended by quarrelling and arguing among themselves?
2. Actually, how do we, - individuals – perceive, see and come to know reality?
3. Do our family upbringing, societal and class values, religious affiliation, etc., condition the way we perceive and see the world? How?
4. Does our perception of the world influence our thinking, our feelings and our behavior? How? Explain.
5. Has the very language we use or we have been brought up in, help us to perceive reality objectively and faithfully or rather distorts it? How?
6. Can any human being possess a comprehensive and total knowledge of reality?
7. What is truth? Can any man perceive it and possess it 100%? Why?
8. Has the moral of the story to do anything with the wars, fights, enmities, hostilities, biases, and prejudices existing in our world today? How?
9. Are the different religions, philosophies, worldviews, ethical codes, and political ideologies absolute or somewhat relative? Can anyone of them claim to have “a final and absolute validity”?
10. St. Anselm, a great saint and theologian said: “God is the resolution of opposites” What could he mean by that? Do you agree with his statement? Why?
11. What are the attitudes of mind and heart necessary to advance progressively towards the knowledge of truth; be it religious, scientific, sociological, anthropological, whatever?
12. Why are we, human beings, so unwilling to change our views, ideas and beliefs?
13. Can you distinguish between the following terms? Explain the meaning of each term: Perceptions – Images - Opinions – Hypothesis – Theories – Facts - Reality.

IDEAS FOR AN INPUT, OR DISCUSSION:

- Our “emotional make up” allows us to grasp only that much of truth that is consonant with our emotional state.
- **God is one; God is Truth (this is our belief).** Philosophies, religions, ideologies and theologies of all kinds, of necessity, cannot claim to exhaust the reality of God.
- **We should be for ever questioners, not passive receivers of the truth.**

- The mental “frame work” inherited from our family and culture not only limits our perceptions, but also conditions them.
- The very “intellectual tools” we inherited from our elders and our culture distort, color and vitiate our perceptions.
- We come to know things, the world, and the truth by bits. Each perception is like a little chip of mosaic that has to be placed together to construct a total picture of our world, not necessary of the real world.
- Our apprehension of reality is an ongoing process, a never ending process.
- We should always question our perceptions and be very critical of them. All of them are only partial and colored glimpses of reality.
- In our honest search for truth, we have to be satisfied with a progressive, provisional and never ending process - knowing pretty well that we shall never attain 100% of the whole truth or reality.
- Our created minds are too puny to comprehend God.
- An unexamined, non-critically evaluated belief is not necessarily a truth, it may be a prejudice.
- An unexamined and unquestioned faith, is not worth its name..
- We, humans, easily jump from beliefs, opinions, theories and hypothesis to facts.
- Our quarrels, fights and bickerings are over perceptions not over facts which in their totality are for ever eluding us.
- Any culture and belief system that in the past or present could give meaning to a civilization can not be totally evil or false.
- It has to possess partial glimpses of the truth, not necessarily the whole truth.
- We cannot pit one culture and civilization against another. We cannot decide which is best. They are different. It’s only through dialogue that we shall be able to build a better one.
- There is a need of an honest sharing, of an open dialogue and of a willingness to change our views and perceptions in order to come closer to the truth.