

The Elephant and the Stray Dog

A story of how true friendship knows no bounds

A long time ago in an ancient kingdom elephants and dogs didn't get along. As a matter of fact, they hated each other. If a dog saw an elephant it would bark as hard as it could to try to frighten the elephant away. Of course, it was really the dog who was frightened. After all, from a dog's point of view, an elephant was a very big animal.

Elephants on their part liked to be left alone. They minded their own business and went about their work. Being the largest animal in the kingdom, they demanded respect. And if an elephant ever caught one of those barking dogs, look out. The elephant would pick the dog up with its trunk and throw it away or if the elephant was really mad, it would step on the dog.

Dogs lived in the dust and were always dirty, so most people didn't care much for dogs either. On the other hand, elephants were proud animals, always prized by their owners. And of all the elephants, none could be prouder than the royal elephant. His job was to carry the king on special occasions. During parades, he was dressed up in beautiful red and gold cloth, with jewels on his head. Then a big seat was put on his broad back, for the King to sit on. The elephant's ivory tusks were polished and gold ornaments were placed on their tips.

When he was not working carrying the King, he was given the best care of any animal in the kingdom. He had a special keeper to see that he was fed the best food, that his stable was kept clean, and that he was given his bath whenever he needed it.

The King himself would come to inspect his special elephant everyday. And so, the keeper was kept very busy making sure the elephant was happy.

One day, a scraggly little stray dog wandered into the royal stables. He smelled the sweet rice that the elephant was eating and couldn't resist following the smell. He was so small that the elephant didn't even notice as the little dog crept between his legs to eat some grains of rice that had fallen.

Everyday the little dog crept into the stable to share the scraps from the elephant's meal. Pretty soon, he was not scraggly any more. His coat shone a golden brown and his muscles bulged. His eyes were alert and he was the best-looking dog in the kingdom.

As he had not disturbed the elephant all this time, the elephant had grown used to him to having him around. And the dog, for his part, had lost his fear and never barked. They became good friends. The elephant looked forward to the dog's visit and would always wait to eat until the dog joined him.

They even began to play together. The dog would grab the elephant's heavy trunk, and the elephant would swing him back and forth, from side to side, up and down, and even in circles! Soon they were the best of friends, and never wanted to be separated from each other.

Then one day a man visiting from a far-away village passed by the elephant shed. When he saw the frisky dog, he offered the elephant's keeper some money. The keeper did not even own him, but he wanted the money, so he sold the dog. He knew he was wrong so he kept it a secret. The man quickly left and took the dog back to his far-away village.

Of course, the royal elephant became very sad. He missed his best friend. He became so sad that he didn't want to do anything, not even eat or drink or bathe. So the keeper had to report this to the king. But he said nothing about selling the friendly dog. It just so happened that the king had a very wise advisor who was famous for his knowledge of animals.

The wise man went to see the elephant. He said to himself, "the elephant is very sad but he does not appear to be sick. Animals and people become this sad when they lose a very good friend." So he asked the guards and attendants, "Do you know if this elephant was very good friends with anyone?"

When they told him how the royal elephant and the stray dog were best friends, he asked "What happened to this stray dog?" "He was taken by a stranger," they replied, "and we don't know where he is now."

So the wise man returned to the king and reported, "Your majesty, I am happy to say your elephant is not sick. It may sound strange, but he became best friends with a stray dog! Since the dog has been taken away, the elephant misses his friend. That is why he won't eat or drink or bathe."

The king said, "Friendship is one of life's most wonderful gifts. How can we bring back my elephant's friend and make him happy again?" "My lord," replied the wise man, "I suggest you announce that the person who has this dog will be punished."

And so, the announcement was made. When the villager heard it, he released the dog right away. The dog was so happy that he ran as fast as he could, straight back to the elephant.

The elephant was so happy to see him that he picked up his friend with his trunk and sat him on top of his head. The happy dog wagged his tail and they both lived happily ever after.

Thoughts:

And so my fellow travelers, it's good to know that friends come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes people who are very different from us can become our very best friends. We should never judge people just by their appearance or where they come from.

Essential Question:

Why is it important not to judge people just by how they look?

Sample Questions:

Why didn't elephants like dogs?

Why was this elephant especially proud?

How did the little dog become his friend?

Sample Applications

Do all of your friends have to be from the same background as you?

Do you have friends from different backgrounds?

Have you ever made friends with someone who was from a different culture or background?

Background: The Jataka Tales are a set of traditional teaching stories used by Buddhists all over the world. The elephant often represents the Buddha or a wise one. Since the Buddha taught the Eight-fold Path of "right" conduct and character, values are also central to these stories. Each story reinforces some virtue of personal or social conduct. They also speak to the compassion of the Buddha.