
Elephant and Flea



Roshi Kapleau agreed to educate a group of psychoanalysts about Zen. After being introduced to the group by the director of the analytic institute, the Roshi quietly sat down upon a cushion placed on the floor. A student entered, prostrated before the master, and then seated himself on another cushion a few feet away, facing his teacher. "What



is Zen?" the student asked. The Roshi produced a banana, peeled it, and started eating. "Is that all? Can't you show me anything else?" the student said. "Come closer, please," the master replied. The student moved in and the Roshi waved the remaining portion of the banana before the student's face. The student prostrated, and left.

A second student rose to address the audience. "Do you all understand?" When there was no response, the student added, "You have just witnessed a first-rate demonstration of Zen. Are there any questions?"

After a long silence, someone spoke up. "Roshi, I am not satisfied with your demonstration. You have shown us something that I am not sure I understand. It must be possible to TELL us what Zen is."

"If you must insist on words," the Roshi replied, "then Zen is an elephant copulating with a flea."

People's reactions to this story:

"What an image this story brings to mind! I see that the infinite universe as large as that may be, is equally matched by the infinite microscopic world, joining the two in perfect harmony."

"On a first reading, the final line suggests that Zen is profane or absurd. Surely this cannot be what the Roshi intended to convey. Perhaps what the Roshi means is that putting Zen into words is profane or absurd."

"Some things are better learned through observation....Words only skew ones ability to establish an honest and personal opinion."

"Describe the colour red to a man who has been blind from birth. Zen is more than words, fitting it into the confinement of language is like an elephant trying to copulate with a flea. It just wouldn't fit."

"Zen is Zen and if you understood it you would not ask."

"He is saying in symbolism how futile it is to understand Zen if you believe you can learn it through words when the only way to truly understand is through actions and feelings. This story really makes you think."

"Maybe Its inconceivable!"

"To attempt to put Zen into words is as impossible as an elephant copulating with a Flea."

"On top of a flagpole a cow gives birth to a calf."

"My reaction to the story is that trying to explain Zen in words, or even with observations, is as impossible as an 'elephant copulation with a flea.' Also, to be able to explain meaning of Zen in words is an admission that one does not understand the meaning of Zen."

"This reminds me of the story of the Master who asked his student to comment on a skein of geese flying overhead. The student said they were flying South for winter - the Master beat him. The student then said they were coming from the North and the same happened. he tried again and again and each time the student's attempt at description was rewarded with a beating. The point being that the student could not describe what he saw only what his belief systems told him what the geese might be doing. Words are often not sufficient, observation and inner understanding may be the only path."


"The Roshi's imagery is spot on: Zen is impossible to explain in the talk, talk, talk of psychoanalysis."

"The Roshi was certainly in a state of transe when he ate the banana because of its taste. Then he wanted to share its smell, waving it to the student. But the student didn't used the right sense and expected an answer from his ears instead of his nose. Anyway the one that was enlightened in this story was certainly the flea...."

"This story is kind-of confusing, but I think it's saying that actions speak louder than words. If only people would stop and listen."

"What I'd like to know is, was the flea on top?"

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