

The Wise People and the Elephant: A Story From the Buddha

Written by Ralph Roberts, edited by Nita Penfold

Materials:

Basket or box with World Religions Source symbol,
smaller basket for small pieces
Underlay (square with cut outs like minarets at the top to look a bit like a palace)
Ruler image: King or Queen image (perhaps a crown)
Elephant image
5 blind wise person images
Banana leaf image
Plow image
Tree image
Snake image
Paint brush image
Small Buddha statue: be sure it is a Buddha and not Hotoi who is the fat bellied abundance god.

Note: depending on the image you use for the ruler, change the gender of the presentation. You also could use an alternate version of the story which does not use blind people, but only wise people who have been blindfolded.

Presentation:

Now watch where I go to get this story so that if you would like to make it your work later you will know where to find it.

Walk to Sources shelves and take basket. Come back to circle and place on floor to your side. Lay out the underlay on the floor in front of you and smooth it out. The minarets should be nearest to you.

Hmm... I wonder what this could be. It's brown all the way through. It could be a tower, or a building.

Take Buddha statue out of basket and show slowly around the circle then place in center of top of underlay nearest to you.

Long, long ago there was a great teacher who told stories. The name we give this teacher is Buddha. It means enlightened one. We call him that because his stories can help us see things more clearly. It is as if these stories bring light into a dark room. One day the Buddha said "Truth! Truth is like this!"

Remove the ruler image and place it on one side of the underlay. (depending on image, it should face inward to the center)

There was once a ruler (king or queen) who often wondered about the great questions of life. He (she) decided one day that he (she) would set up a test. He (she) ordered that an elephant be brought into the throne room.

Place the elephant image in the center of the underlay.

After the elephant was brought to the palace and into the ruler's throne room the king (queen) gave a second order. He (she) ordered that the five wise people who taught at the gates of the city be brought to him (her).

One by one place the five wise people opposite the ruler. They will be in a line from the top of the underlay to bottom.

Each of the wise people happened to have been born blind. The ruler had each wise person placed so that he or she was able to feel a different part of the elephant's body. He (she) had the first wise person stand so that she could feel the elephant's tusk.

Place the first wise person by the elephant's tusk.

He (she) had the second wise person stand where he could hold the elephant's trunk.

Place the second wise person by the elephant's trunk.

The ruler had the third wise person stand holding the elephant's ear.

Place the third wise person so that person is touching the elephant's ear.

The ruler stood the fourth wise person right in front of the elephant so that he could stand touching one of the creature's legs.

Place the fourth wise person by the elephant's leg.

The ruler then had the fifth and last wise person touch the elephant's tail.

Place the fifth wise person touching one the elephant's tail.

Then the ruler issued the challenge. He (she) said, "You are each holding what we call an elephant. Now tell me what an elephant is like."

Place one hand on the wise person touching the elephant's tusk. With your second hand remove the image of the plow and keep it hidden in your hand.

The wise person who was holding onto the elephant's tusk exclaimed, "An elephant is like a plow made of metal, and sharpened to cut through the earth."

Place the plow piece next to the wise person. Then place one hand on the second wise person holding the elephant's trunk. With your other hand remove and hold onto the image of the snake.

The second wise person who was in front of the elephant holding its' trunk said, "Hear my words. An elephant is like a great snake."

Place the snake next to the wise person. Then place one hand on the third wise person holding the elephant's ear. With your other hand remove and hold onto the image of the banana leaf.

The third wise person who was holding one of the elephant's large ears said, "They're all wrong! An elephant is like a banana leaf."

Place the Banana leaf image near the third wise person. Then with one hand touch the fourth wise person holding the elephant's leg. With your other hand remove and hold onto the image of a tree.

The fourth wise person who was holding one of the elephant's legs declared "I tell you an elephant is like the trunk of a giant tree."

Then place one hand on the final wise person holding the elephant's tail, and with your other hand remove and hold onto the image of a paint brush.

The fifth wise person was holding the elephant's tail and said, "No. No. No. An elephant is like a paint brush."

Place the image of the paint brush next to the final wise person.

Before long the five blind wise people began arguing with each other calling one another "Fool" and "Crazy."

Point to the appropriate image as you say . . .

They fought and fought crying "An elephant is like a tree." "No it is like a fan." "Any person with sense knows that an elephant is like a plow." "They are like paint brushes." "Elephants are like snakes."

"This," said the Buddha, "this is what truth is like."

Pause for a moment and look at the layout of the story, then look at the children around the circle and begin the wondering questions.

Wondering questions:

I wonder if you have heard or seen any of this before?

I wonder which part of the story you liked the best?

I wonder if there is one part that is more important than the others?

I wonder if we can leave a part out and still have a story?

I wonder where you might be in this story?

I wonder what the ruler wondered about?

I wonder why each wise person named something different to describe an elephant?

I wonder what would happen if they changed places? (change people one at a time)

I wonder if one person is wiser than the others?

I wonder if the elephant could be all these things?

I wonder if the elephant has a name?

I wonder if the wise people have names?

I wonder what TRUTH means to you?

I wonder which Promise this story reminds you of?

I wonder where the Spirit of Love and Mystery might be in this story?

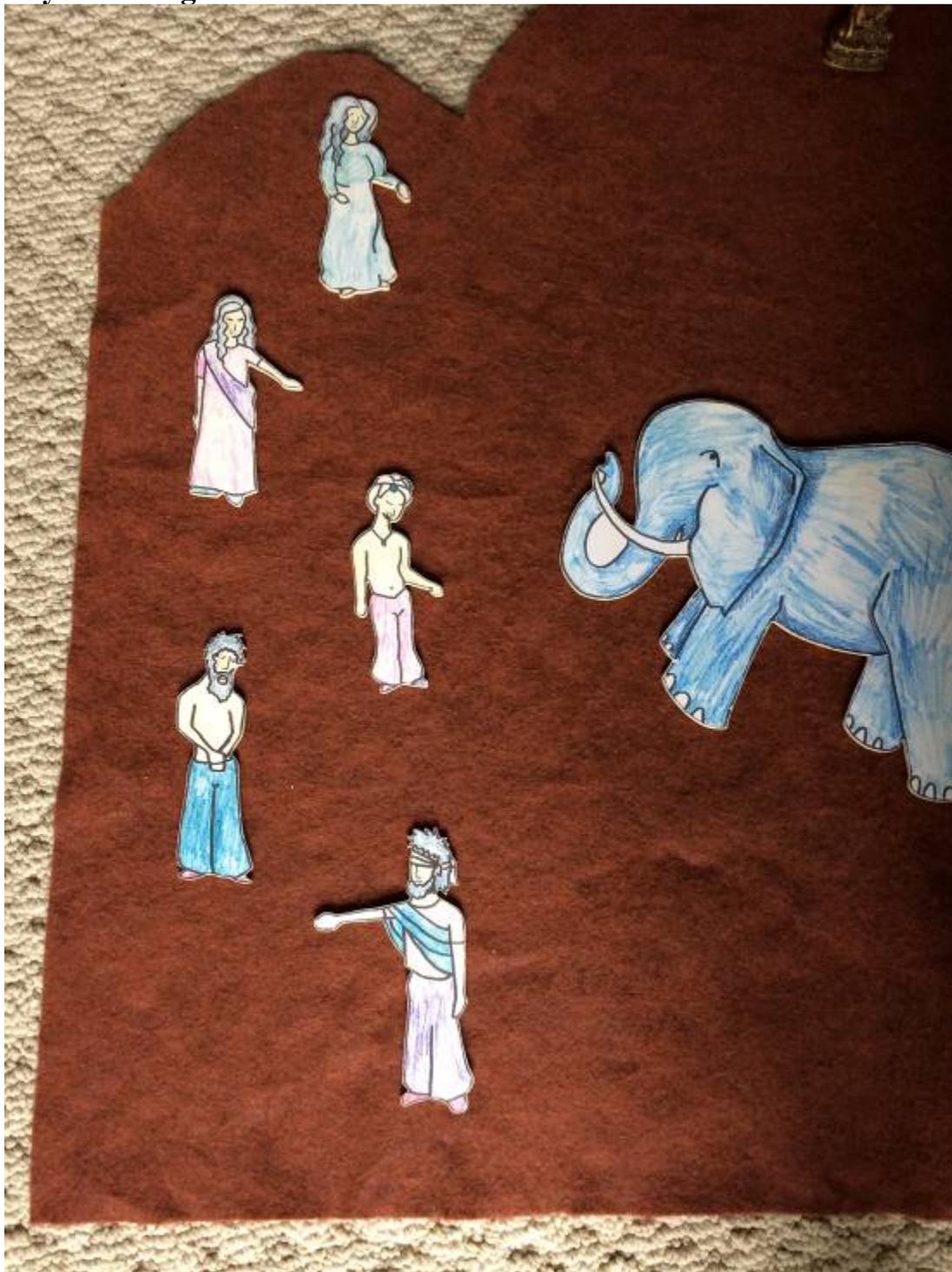
Now watch how I put this story away, so that if you make it your work, you will be able to get it ready for the next person.

Name each piece as you put it in the basket in reverse order: the paintbrush, the tree, the banana leaf, the snake, the plow, the five wise people, the elephant, the ruler, the throne room (underlay). Fold up underlay carefully and lay on top of basket.

Now watch where I put the story so that if you wish to make it your work later, you will be able to find it.

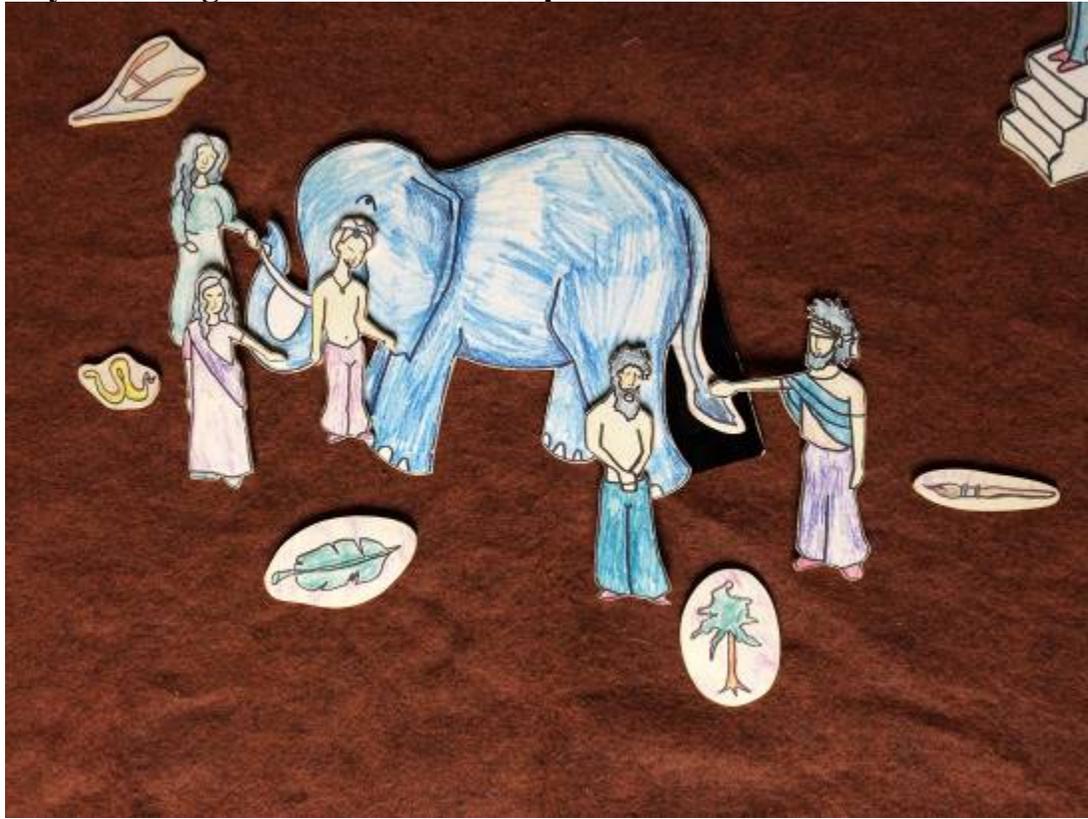
Put basket back onto the shelf.

Layout for figures:



**The Wise People and the Elephant
World Religions Source
Buddhism**

Layout of Figures Placed with Elephant:



Final Layout:



Layout from Worship Woodworks:

