

Padma and the Elephant Sutra

By

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For all elephants

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1. Awakening

Two old elephants sat together beside an evening fire, signalling in silence, careful not to rouse their sleeping companions.

“I dreamed again of the past not yet happened,” trunk-waved the younger. “It is always the same. I am suspended above the sacred mountain when I notice an elephant illumed by a golden cloud. As I approach, he turns to me and roars so loud it shakes the foundations of the earth.”

“Perhaps it is an ancestor dream?” twitched the Elder. “I too have had future visions, but outside dreamworld. Relaxing by the fire, sensing the approaching clans, I find myself entangled in the roots of the world. The spirits tell me hope is coming.”

“Is it possible this ‘hope’ comes to help us fulfil the covenant?”

“Who can say, Ananda? The agreement is so ancient, no-one knows what to expect. All we have is faith and patience. Truth will be revealed in time, but every day humans draw nearer to our high altar. If spirit ancestors are to help our cause they must act soon. Today I am meeting with a Seer to interpret my vision. Will you join us?”

Ananda curled her trunk, accepting the invitation.

Spring had blossomed in Ceylon and elephants were on the move. Over the entire island, their annual migration was

underway. Whole clans stirred, radiating inwards to the central mountains and its high plateau. Leaving their homeland pastures, few remained. Each travelled with singular intent; a pilgrimage, a votive duty. They were the children of the sixteen dig-gajas, descendants of the first ancestors, formed from the shell of the cosmic egg. Their mortal purpose, the protection and preservation of life, a solemn oath passed down through countless generations.

Manifested in elephant flesh, they walked on earth with divine benedictions. Stewards of the wilderness, tasked with guarding the glories of creation. Each rejoiced in sensual delight, only in death to return once again to the celestial herds. Carried in the memory of water, it was elephant ancestors who turned the Water Wheel of Life. It was they who made possible the cycle of rains which fattened the rivers and the cooling mists which nourished the timeless forests.

Each clan now converged on the Great Gathering, the principal site for elephant worship and the most important event in their year.

Ananda had much to do in preparation for the Gathering. As a senior attendant, she was responsible for the Elders welfare and their readiness to accommodate the whole tribe. She busied herself, barking commands to her juniors,

“Make sure there is food and fuel in the atrium. There will be no time to replenish stocks when the clans arrive. Please ensure the meeting spaces are clear. Has the Hora tree

arrived? Does the longhorn work? I shall be giving talks to the young in the cinnamon chamber, so stack plenty of bamboo. Don't forget to fill the water troughs."

Ananda could not help fretting. But her assistants possessed the memory of elephants; they would not forget the water. So, as they did every year, they stacked the peat, blew the horn, made neat piles of herbs, and collected water in their trunks to fill the troughs, all in readiness for the coming days.

The annual Gathering was the very marrow of elephant life. It suffused their spiritual, cultural and social bones.

Who had not heard Ananda's aphorism: If paradise is the living world we venerate, the central plateau is our high altar; and, if the guardians at the cardinal points are the foundations of paradise, our Gatherings are its heart and soul.

The Seer sat motionless while Ananda recalled her dreamworld tale.

"It is true the dig-gajas carry the weight of our world, but I have no knowledge of them shaking. Perhaps it is an ancestor message, but I shall need to consider it further."

The Seer would give little thought to Ananda's dream. He was far more interested in the Elder's vision. All Seers' minds now focused on fulfilment of the covenant, praying for clues

to the ancestors' intentions, hoping for signs foretelling their fate.

"And this...hope. You believe it comes from our roots, our ancestors?"

"No...from the tree roots. A message from the tree spirits. Or...maybe the water spirits spoke. I'm not sure."

"Did the spirits say when we can expect hope?"

"Soon."

From the south-east of the island, the Uposatha clan made steady progress. Heading to the Great Gathering for the full moon, it was time to honour their forebears and ensure the coming of the rains. Once again, they had been summoned to ease the burdens of a parched earth. Incandescent flashing bolts called them to worship, as powerful ancestral rumblings urged them on towards their dutiful goal.

The clan had ventured from their traditional grazing at Yala, to perform the ceremonial rites and fulfil the promise of the southern deluge. To ignore the ancestor calls was unthinkable. If the rains were unclaimed and the waters not replenished, terrible calamities would follow. It was their responsibility, their most important task, to feed the life for which they so assiduously cared.

“I’m tired.”

“Keep moving Abu,” trunk-nudged Mamma, “we must be at the Gathering before the moon is round.”

He stretched his trunk up to the bright, distant sliver, but could not scent it.

“Abu, catch,” Rani blared, as the stick bounced off his flank.

He looked over to see his older sister poised, ready to run. Picking up the projectile, he flung it without care.

“Catch,” he squealed, as it disappeared into the scrub.

But the game was not stick-throwing, it was chase, and Abu swallowed the bait. He bounded after her, unsure his legs could trot fast enough to catch up.

The herd continued into the foothills, feeding off soft grasses and succulent vines festooned in the abundant flowers of spring. Journeying well-worn jungle paths each kept their faith, visiting many sacred sites. Most ancient ruins, distant echoes of a long forgotten civilisation. All were vestiges of a time when humans aligned with the natural world and the values of elephantkind. This year, the clan travelled through the riverine forests of the Menik Ganga, the river of gems. They would trace its course over the coming nights, through mountain passes, over the southern ridge, and into the high range.

Abu, like all young elephants, had been taught their paths were old, part of a network of routes known as alimankadas. Some trails held arcane knowledge, others only accessible with the express permission of Elders. In an elephant's mind, the paths, both mundane and sacred, mapped the island. Places continually changed as forests moved and rivers altered course, but alimankadas always remained the same. It was a simple fact made more complicated in recent times as elephants tried to cross their cherished lands. Ditches, fences, fires and watchtowers, all designed to deny access, restricting elephant movement. No doubt this would be a discussion point for the Gathering.

He grabbed her tail and she fell with ease, deliberately, Abu sensed. Lifting his front legs onto her round belly he tried to scramble over, with little effect.

“Help! Help! I’m being eaten by a jungle monster.”

Abu flailed his trunk, generating its familiar high-pitched whine.

“You’re the monster, and I’ve saved the whole herd.”

The two young Uposatha continued rolling together, flattening grass, until eventually Rani signalled with her trunk.

“Let’s go to the trees and play our splashing game in the stream.”

Abu was unsure. Mamma told them to stay in the clearing. But Rani had been kind all night, the sun was coming, and splashing was his favourite game.

“Okay,” he flapped.

The clan welcomed the moisture-laden coolness of the climb. It was a steep ascent, up through river canyons all the way to the southern escarpment. Passing rambunctious falls, elephant spirits sparkled in the spuming cascades, to be greeted with trumpets of wondrous delight.

The new moon had waxed to its familiar crescent by the time they reached the top of the pass. From here, the scenery opened out across a sweeping basin to reveal gentle undulations of densely wooded valleys, covered in a patchwork of rising elephant mist. The lofty canopies of mixed deciduous trees had given way to more evergreen and coniferous woods. Extravagant, delicious flowering shrubs prevailed. Lavish ferns and opulent perfumed bushes filled the laurel forests, providing succulent grazing for tired elephants. Beyond were the distant blue hills and their final destination, at the *end of the world*.

The Uposatha clan fanned out across the basin. A kinship group of some fifty elephants followed Maya, their long-serving matriarch, around the lee of the southern peaks. They travelled for several days with little sign of the main herd. All felt apprehensive having witnessed troubling changes in their homeland pastures. Hostilities between humans had stopped.

Even so, they heard many stories from wandering elephants of increased hunting and brutal killings, chilling accounts which left them fearful of the years ahead. The old contract between elephants and humankind, which stood for thousands of years, appeared to have collapsed. Maya could do little to change her family's disquiet, other than to remind them the Gathering should be a joyful time of ancestor worship and remembrance.

Rani and Abu crept into the trees unobserved, heading straight for the beck.

"Who can squirt the highest?"

Rani stood in the stream, noisily sucking up water.

"I can squirt you," said Abu, spraying his sister.

She recoiled, stepping back onto a patch of bubbles escaping from the bank. Turning to examine the popping sounds which tickled her foot, she felt the ground begin to shake around her.

"Don't like it!" cried Abu, curling his trunk between his front legs.

"I can feel monsters under the water."

"Maybe it's a naga devil, coming to get you!"

As Rani rumbled her teasing remark, a single bubble grew rapidly out of the gassy commotion, bursting with a loud *pop*. Thick river mud splattered her face, startling the adolescent into bleating her blind alarm.

“Run Abu, run to Mamma.”

While the bond group foraged, a small family wandered away from the herd. Always safety conscious, they travelled in rumble distance should they need to quickly rejoin the others. Aliya was the eldest and grand-daughter to Maya. She was responsible for the band of siblings, a position earned, based on storytelling and a proven sagacity when making decisions.

Aliya was accompanied by junior relations; sisters, brothers, cousins and more. Mother trusted her to protect the younger ones, permitting them a good deal of freedom to roam. Separated from the herd for two nights, the third day beckoned when Aliya was disturbed by Abu. A series of short, shrill, trumpet sounds preceded the young calf's stumbling retreat to the protection of his mother.

“Mamma, Mamma, come quickly,” he waved, appearing at the edge of the clearing where she grazed.

“What's going on? Where is your sister? You should be with your sister!” Soft, comfort rumbles followed.

Abu responded, hurrying to her side and pressing against her leg. Stretching the tip of his trunk to her cheek, he reached up to push his arched back into her round belly. A succession of little chirps and low, descending rumbles outlined his distress.

“Mamma, a devil serpent is growing out of the water. A naga demon and it lives under the river. Rani says it is coming for me, and I’m frightened!”

Aliya moved her front leg forward, allowing him to slip underneath and suckle. Attached to her breast, safe in his mother’s care, fear of the river monster was soon dispelled. While he drank he thought of Rani, how brave she had been not to run from the beast. He compared his own timid nature, still tied to your mother’s tail hairs, young bulls often teased. Other four-year-olds seemed more independent, he worried, concerned he should be weaned from mother’s milk, but nervous of letting go. He did not yet understand the world, relying on the unconditional care of his kin. Still an infant, for him the magical forest was also a place filled with terror.

“Don’t be afraid my child,” Aliya rumbled. “There are no naga demons. Your sister is teasing you.”

She began to tell her naga story.

“It is true that there are many tales of nagas and yakshas. Nature spirits living in the rivers and woods. But they are just fanciful imaginings. Many years ago, before ad-Om, other tribes lived in paradise, working with our ancestors to protect

the forests. They called themselves the Naga, or the Yaksha. They were human...”

Abu was not listening. An intense fragrance beguiling his senses. Flapping his trunk, he strained to capture every airborne trace of the delightful scent. And as the sweet nectar coated his long snout, managing two tasks proved one task too difficult. He stopped suckling, mesmerised by the exquisite perfume. His phenomenal sense of smell would in time become habituated to the many aromas which assailed his nostrils. Nevertheless, in that moment, he was delirious, intoxicated, and completely oblivious to the fearful forest around him.

Abu was perplexed by his trunk. Something he still tripped over when distracted, anxious he might never control the unwieldy appendage. Its incredible versatility was a lot for a young elephant to master. He watched with awe as adult trunks pulled down branches as thick as his legs. Then picking single flowers with the same flexuous limb, they would stroke his face with ticklish petals. He started at piercing trumpet blares and snoozed to soft squelching whispers. How would he ever decipher the puzzling variety of meanings conveyed in their many signals? Trunks were used for feeding, bathing, drinking, bonding, even for using tools. Now he recognised the power of his trunk in detecting and reading the many odorous layers that surround him.

“Rani can sniff water half a night’s walk away,” he told other animals with pride.

It would take him years to interpret the subtle, sophisticated vocabulary of smells. From the foulest miasma to the finest bouquet, from signals of danger to the language of family bonds. Even longer before his sensitive trunk detected low-frequency calls beyond his hearing. Skilful techniques employed by adults. Doubtless, Abu was anxious about his trunk. There is so much to learn.

“Abu, pay attention, where is Rani? She is supposed to look after you while I forage in the tall grass. I told you not to leave her side.”

Aliya strolled languorously towards the forest line where the river cut a path down the hillside. She continued grazing, swiping sods of grass against her ankle, knocking off insects and soil. Over the lowlands behind her, the rising sun was unsettling early morning dew. Soon she would direct her family into the forest, to rest under the cool of its canopy. But first, she would investigate this ‘naga’, and ask Rani for an explanation.

On approaching the trees a twinkle of red light burst out from between the branches, dazzling her eyes. Aliya froze, and then slowly raised her trunk to scent for danger. Her nostrils filled with the smell of sweet water ahead. The air hung thick with the syrupy perfume of nectar and the hummus of fresh earth. She recognised the scent of deer and monkey, of coming rains and distant burning trees. Yet her trunk offered no clues to the unexpected light.

Spreading her ears to capture nearby sounds, she heard babbling water and the chatter of elevated monkeys. With her

fullest attention, she could hear sunbirds flitting from plant to plant. She listened to them hover, placing their long, downturned bills into the fiery orange inflorescence which filled the late spring valley. They are not the source. Aliya admired the tenacity of the tiny iridescent birds, how they burrowed their shelters in the globulous silk and leaf webs of spider colonies. She obeyed the elephant rule not to damage their nests, especially during breeding season. Occupied bushes were left undisturbed, a decision which benefited spiders, so vindicating the parasitic bird. She did not condemn them, accepting that all living creatures had to survive.

The busy new parents' continued their familiar call, *zwick*, *zwick*. If the birds are not concerned by the twinkling, perhaps there is nothing to worry about. She moved warily towards the source of the flash. Another burst, this time of blue and green.

"Stay behind me Abu" she cautioned, shepherding him with a swish of her trunk.

With growing concern, Aliya blew a short, loud trumpet call, beckoning her family. Momentary crashing sounds signalled their acknowledgement. They had been foraging among a thick clump of bamboo, enjoying its tender shoots when they recognised the urgency of her cry. All could see from her posture she was troubled, standing alert, pointedly directing her attention to the river. They trotted towards her, bunching together in a tight band, young ones in the centre.

“Where is Rani?” Aliya inquired, impatiently swinging her tail.

No-one answered.

Her whereabouts soon became apparent, emerging from the treeline mock charging a torque macaque. Fond of the drooping flowers of the golden rain tree, the monkey had discovered a small bush draped in the delicious blooms. Descending her morning perch to enjoy its bountiful promise, agile hands rushed to pick her meal. A defiant tail flicked annoyance at her young tormentor as she sprang back up to her kin. Only then did Rani notice the group in full defensive posture, a sculptured composition of vigilance. An arrangement which ought to include her. In a moment she constructed her defence.

“Mamma, Mamma, there is something in the water, I can’t find Abu, something hurt my eye, and I don’t know where the others are.”

“Silence!” demanded a single, loud ear flap.

Rani stopped her rapid chirping and dropped her head, trunk hanging loose. Recognising the gravity of her mother’s signal she hurried over to the formation. Squeezing into the centre, aunts administered long, reassuring caresses.

Aside from occasional ear twitches and tail flicks, the group stood motionless. They scented the air and listened for notable sounds among the customary rustle and drone. Aliya pressed the toes of her right foot into the soft earth, feeling

for unusual movement in the vicinity. Next, she laid the sensitive tip of her trunk on the ground to help read more subtle, distant vibrations. She sensed animals; a mob of deer, perhaps boars, running from something quick, probably hungry leopards. The chatter of elephant families moving towards the high pass could be felt, some close, others days ahead. A heavy rain shower wetting the flatland somewhere to the south. But nothing unusual detected nearby.

After some time, feeling more assured, Aliya moved forward cautioning the others to remain. Treading across the clearing, she walked towards the strange lights, easing her way through the trees and vines at the forest edge. Deftly placing her feet in the undergrowth, she continued her silent advance. The sun had climbed higher, forming oblique beams of searching light, dappling the forest floor. When her pupils dilated in the sharp contrast, she could see only bright daubs of colour peppering the heavily shadowed trees. Vivid reflections of emerald, ruby, and sapphire, bejewelled the wooded scene. It was an enchanting sight and her curiosity soon outweighed her fear. She traced a path across the drying bed, picking her way over scattered rocks and twisted, upturned stumps.

She crept further across the channel to the remaining narrow brook, where she discovered a large mound of mud piled up at the water's edge. The silted heap glistened and glimmered with tiny fragments of alluvial gems. Colourful debris formed and eroded in the gneiss and marble deposits of the surrounding hills. Remnants washed downstream long ago, buried, unbidden in the rich mire of red earth. In sunlit

shafts, a myriad of radiant colours coruscated from the wetted form. Aliya walked around the illumination, dazzled by its glittering display.

“What are you?” she quizzed the beautiful clinquant stack. No scent or sound returned from the earthly shape. It stood motionless, except for a soft, sticky sludge, which oozed and trickled back into the turbid water. As she stared, she thought its appearance similar to an elephant, about the size of Rani. But it does not smell or sound like anyone I know. What is made of mud, sparkles, and has the figure of an elephant? She raised her trunk and looked up, as though physically searching her memory to improve the answers retrieval.

With none forthcoming, she pressed her trunk into the sparkling flank. It was firm, yielding little, even when she pushed a little harder. A sniff around the front and back revealed only the rich scent of loam. She stared at it for some time. A prolonged inducement to succumb to her silent interrogation. An effective tactic when employed on her young. Nothing happened. Only the twinkling of sunlit minerals, provoked by scurrying clouds and the flicker of leaves in a pre-monsoon breeze.

This situation is very odd. She rolled her flanks, frustrated by her unsolved riddle. Aliya was unsure how to respond to such an unusual situation. The safety of her charges had been her first impulse, satisfying herself they were in no immediate danger. Except, this was something so strange it could not be ignored. Alone in the trees, she assessed her best plan. Shall I call a general meeting? I must summon the whole bond

group. Yes, that's it! I will request the opinions and advice of my elders.

Aliya reproached the mound, "Of course, a full discussion will have to take place!" as if to discredit the questioner.

I shall request a gathering of views. Consider them all, until...*thinking harder*...until an agreement is reached. An agreement on what action is necessary.

More relaxed, having decided what to do, Aliya walked the short distance back to the clearing to inform the others of her findings. Then standing feet apart she gave a long, low, throaty rumble. The call reverberated through her belly and padded feet, pushing sound waves across the ground in all directions, beyond the limits of the loudest roar. She hoped for a swift response to her bidding, which proved to be the case. By mid-morning, small family groups of varying relations began to appear, all having abandoned their shady repose.

Each arrival prompted a renewed commotion as family members exuberantly greeted their kin. Relatives and friends who had no contact for several days ran to each other emitting loud screams and roars while vigorously flapping their ears. Everyone was urinating and defecating as they jostled and pressed, desperate for each other's affections. After much excitement, and the greeting rituals suitably complete, grandmother matriarch turned to Aliya to ask why they had been summoned.

“Great mother, I thank you for your timely response. I call this meeting to request your advice regarding a strange occurrence in the river.” Her solicitations delivered in formal timbre, she opened her mouth wide, curling her trunk in obeisance to her venerable elder.

Maya responded with a perfunctory swish of her tail, and the group moved out to regard the unusual event. Supervised by juvenile females, the younger ones headed upstream to play in the water, while adults entered into earnest deliberations. By now the form was visibly more detailed. Most of the mud had slid back into the stream leaving the unmistakable contours of an elephant. The remaining silt dried to a reddish brown in the morning heat, caking tiny gems to the fresh baked shape. They gazed at its outline for some time, conferring in stilted rumbles until trumpets began to sound,

“Perhaps it’s a clay elephant jewel, a gift from our ancestors,” blew the first offering, from the fringes of the crowd.

“Is it a clay warrior from an ancient king’s elephant army?”

“I think it’s a rock. A demon transformed into a boulder by an angry spirit,” said a young cow who had the habit of trying to imagine the worst possible scenario.

“No, it’s a human trick, we should leave now,” replied a returning adolescent male whose thoughts were often darker.

Someone suggested another mud bubble, only too thick to pop. Another believed it to be a sign, but of what, no-one was sure. The answer which struck the clearest note came from Maya's sister, Taru, well respected for her knowledge of the heavens. Her tone was sombre, head high and trunk down, generating an air of propriety as she turned her back to the heap. Everyone stood aghast. In that instant, each understood her meaning, and a respectful silence descended on the crowd.

Her simple gesture signalled the shocking view they were looking at an elephant corpse. Older members were all too aware of the terror of quicksand.

"Who can say how long the body has been submerged, or who it might be," she said.

Everyone knew of elephants who had disappeared over the years, never to be heard from again. Most assumed to have been killed by humans, perhaps some consumed by the ground.

The group became unsettled as they waited for an announcement. The convention being every elephant may offer an opinion, but it is the role of the agreed leader to make the final decision. On recognising their growing agitation, the matriarch acted decisively as strict rituals must be heeded for the dead. She lifted her trunk to command their attention.

"I think it's an elephant," Maya declared, "but we must be sure."

Pointing her finger at the refulgent hoard, she squirted a strong jet of water freshly drawn from between her feet. Others joined in, soon revealing their answer. Stood before them was the figure of a young female elephant. They estimated her to be eight or nine years old. The most immediately striking feature was her pinkness, from head to toe, and her white, downy hair, an albino. No-one expressed concern for her colour, while uncommon, it was not unknown. Maya herself once gave birth to an albino elephant which the ancestors claimed in his first year of life.

They all agreed the elephant was not dead. Death has a look and scent. Equally, no-one was certain she was alive, a state which also has a look and scent, and usually a sound. As everyone stretched their trunks to sniff and stroke the object, only Abu, lying in the water upstream, noticed the watchful eagle silhouette seated above the melee. He stared impassively as the shadow spread its wings, and flew away, circling high off into the clouds.

“As pink as a...a...?” trunk signalled an aunt, “as a lotus flower!”

The elephants rumbled softly in agreement as each reflected on the conjured image.

“Who is this...elephant?” they murmured, with slow swings of trunk and tail.

“Elephants do not appear from the mud like lotus flowers, do they?”

While those assembled digested the new information, the pink pachyderm blinked. Drawn to the movement, a mass of eager trunks swarmed around her face. Digits and nostrils prodded and sniffed, as they searched in vain for further clues. The enigmatic elephant remained still, only gradually, as they continued to spray water at her nascent form, did she begin to move. Then surprising everyone, a trunk shot up and waved around periscopically and four intoxicated legs staggered forwards, slipping on the slick wet earth.

“Which is your clan?” trumpeted the suspicious matriarch, “I’ve met elephants from them all, but I cannot place you.”

Keen to make sense of the mud elephant, interrogating the adolescent seemed reasonable, despite her recent emergence from the river.

Maya’s question was pertinent. Elephants from the regional clans have distinctive features. Different coloured skin, nails, and eyes. Different shaped heads and trunks. Humans long since recognised the diversity of elephants, dividing them into ten castes, as is their way. The Uposatha caste have light skin and yellowish nails, medium sized heads, strong, long legs and trunks that touch the ground. Humans consider them highborn and as with Hema and Chaddanta castes, suitable for their religious ceremonies and temple duties.

Like all elephants, Maya regarded the caste system as ill-conceived. She accepted humans had crudely identified the

physical attributes of the different clans. Even so, they failed to understand elephant roles, imposing their own cultural and religious beliefs. Elephants had well-established social divisions long before humans arrived. Based in part on regional bonds, but also on ancestor decrees, individual abilities, attributes and interests, and on local custom. For example, with a talent for paying attention, you could be a watcher regardless of Pingala clan associations. The role was traditionally ascribed to solitary Pingala males, tasked with guarding against unwanted intrusion at ritual dances and songs. Often vocal and obstinate, humans viewed them as dangerous rogues and since the arrival of the gun would kill them on sight. An act which still alerted the worshipful to danger.

Roles ascribed by humans impacted significantly on the lives and stories of elephants. The Uposatha caste, as with all so-called castes, had been hunted for over two thousand years. Made captive for religious ceremonies, their enslavement accorded with human notions of piety.

Captivity meant the clan came into close contact with humans, gaining the opportunity to learn much of their beliefs and practises. Maya's own father, Yala Raja, lived as a Maligawa tusker, carrying the Buddha Tooth Relic at the annual procession in Kandy. Like warrior elephants who fought in human wars, Uposatha also travelled. Often given as gifts to foreign dignitaries, in time, banishment came to suit their purpose as elephants attempted to influence human behaviours. So the Uposatha, as with all high castes, became authorities in understanding human actions. To elephants,

they became known as interpreters, and sometimes messengers to the humans.

“How long have you been hiding in the mud? Who is your mother? What are your stories?” Maya continued.

“What are your stories?” the young elephant bleated.

All those gathered stepped back in surprise, unsure what to expect next. But no more sounds escaped, so the old matriarch continued her detailed enquiry of the strange river creature. The lotus-coloured elephant continued to grow in strength but remained confused. Through repeated questioning, Maya established that the young one carried no stories, a fact which left the whole group perplexed. All elephants have stories. Storytelling is what we do; when we’re not eating.

Maya explained to the dazed newcomer how elephants pride themselves on their ability to remember, drawing on their vast reserves of shared knowledge.

“We recite stories of things seen and done, of our island paradise, its trees and animals, and memories of each other. Most importantly, we tell the stories of our ancestors. Sometimes we remember forgotten knowledge, age-old secrets which benefit all in paradise. When new ancestor stories are recollected in dreamlife, we convey the vision at the Gathering. Seers spend long nights deliberating over our

dreams, proclaiming a remembered truth, or just a fanciful tale, which of course any elephant can imagine.”

She continued rumbling to her patient audience, “Our tales are the fabric of our lives, whether in song, dance, poetry or storytelling. From recollections and reminiscences, we chronicle the past and stay true to what we see as our divine earthly purpose, to safeguard and maintain precious life. So you see, when we hear you say, ‘I do not have any stories’, to our minds you are as good as declaring you do not exist.”

The elephants dispersed to forage and take on water, allowing time to consider the mysterious pink elephant. After much discussion, they agreed she appeared to be harmless but unusual. It was agreed, Maya would invite her to accompany them to the Gathering. The House of Elders would know what to do, and the elephants could relinquish responsibility for the strange creature.

The relief was palpable among the Uposatha, as everyone viewed the unexpected event with grave concern. Like the dig-gajas burdened to carry the world on their shoulders, elephants carried an enormous sense of responsibility for the whole of paradise. They would be thankful for the wisdom of the Elders’ counsel. It was a risk taking her to the Gathering. No-one was altogether convinced she was benign. Although, it could be equally risky not to take her if she proved to be somehow important.

As the young elephant had no stories to tell, she, therefore, had no name, as an elephant’s name is the story they tell. To some, it might seem a very protracted way of identifying

individuals, but elephants are not known for their brevity. A language of such complexity, every modulation in the simplest rumble incorporates vast quantities of detailed information. Day to day events are memorised with ease, never having thought it necessary to record anything. Any subject is described in the fullest possible terms as a matter of proper elephant manners.

After considering the whole episode, they decided to call her, 'a large, jewelled mound of mud which came out of the riverbed in the manner of a lotus flower and turned into something which resembled an elephant'. The name continued for some time, to include events preceding and following her appearance until all were satisfied the tale was complete. In short, her name was Padma, meaning lotus flower. After giving Padma her first story, the elephants agreed they would remain in the river valley for a few days before heading toward the high eastern pass. They would use the time to rest, play and bond together, and learn as much as they could of their new companion.