

Daily Meditation 10-06-25

Elephants in Danger: African Droughts, A Sign of Our Times

Good morning.

Our meditation today is on elephants. And this is appropriate, I think, because the struggle to keep elephants alive, especially in Africa, is very serious issue today. Of course, it goes along with global warming, and also with greed: the rapaciousness of greed.

It is the hunt for ivory that has decimated so many of the African elephants in this century. Well, in the last century. I'd say that 90%, as I pointed out in my essay, that there used to be millions of elephants in Africa; now there are only 350,000 left. Studies tell us that 90% of our loss of elephants is due to humans seeking ivory. And of course, this is one reason the ivory hunting has been forbidden of late.

But here are some interesting facts about elephants. And I think to talk about elephants, just like we talked about chimpanzees this past week, in honoring the work and life of Jane Goodall -- to talk about elephants or chimpanzees is to talk about Mother Earth. Mother Earth is anything but inanimate. Mother Earth is constantly giving birth to amazing beings, amazing species. And elephants certainly stand out, don't they, literally. They are the largest land mammal on the planet, and their extinction or their decimation of numbers, is a wake-up call, a canary in the mine for all of us. And as I pointed out in the essay, Kenyan elders, elders in Kenya tell us that if elephants disappear, humanity will go crazy. That we depend on them more than we know, and we have learned from them. They have been our mentors from the beginning, according to the teachings of the indigenous people of Africa.

So here are a few facts. They usually live to 60 years of age. The oldest elephant recorded died at 86. And what will often kill an elephant is their teeth. They lose their teeth gradually; their molars weigh five to six pounds. But when they lose their teeth, they cannot eat. So they actually starve to death, at old age. There are three species of elephant: two in Africa and one in Asia. The African elephants are larger, and they can weigh 10,000 pounds. Their trunks can lift up to 770 pounds. They detect sounds through their feet and the vibrations of the earth. The baby elephant is on its feet 20 minutes after it is born. But it is blind when it's born, so it depends on its trunk to feel its way around. And of course, on its mother. And elephants are very matriarchal, and the male elephants do not help raise the children. The mother elephants do that.

And elephants can swim six hours without resting. They are the strongest mammal on the planet. They can hear each other five miles away. Their hearing is extraordinary. And they become independent by the age of eight years of age. But they do as a rule, with exceptions, belong to large family groups, herds, and the herds can be around 100 family members, extended families, for sure.

One of the stories that we heard from Kenya, is that 10 years ago, there was a new president in Botswana who was very pro-elephant, and he made very strict laws about hunting elephants and so forth. And the word got around in the elephant world! And many, many elephants came from other countries in Africa to Botswana, because they learned that humans would be kind to them. However, a more recent president in Botswana has swung more in the opposite direction. And many elephants are dying, both by drought and global warming, but also by the return of ivory hunting. Because the humans have become soft when protecting the elephants.

You can tell elephants what species they belong to, which are the three species, by their ears: the African savanna bush elephant or the African forest elephant or the Asian elephant. The ears of African elephants are much larger than their cousins'. And people say the elephants' ears are shaped like the continent of Africa, and they say the ears of Asian elephants are shaped like the Indian subcontinent.

African elephants have two fingers at the tip of their trunks, while Asian elephants only have one. The trunks are amazing instruments. They have 150,000 muscles in the trunk, muscle units, and called perhaps most sensitive organ found in any mammal. The trunks can suck up water to drink up to eight liters of water, and they also use it as snorkel when they swim.

Their tusks are actually teeth, and they continue to grow throughout their lives. They use them for feeding, for taking bark off trees, digging up roots, or as defense when fighting. But of course, because that's where the ivory is, they also bring on the greed of humans, and even their own demise. They keep their skin clean, and protect themselves from sunburn by taking regular dust and mud baths. And they're eating all day long. They are vegetarian, but they are eating 400 pounds of food a day.

They communicate through vibrations, and by sounding their trumpet, by body language, touch and scent, and also through signals and create the vibrations that go in the ground. and travel, as I say, five miles.

Two days after a baby elephant is born, it can keep up with the herd. Just two days. That way, the elephants can keep migrating and finding water and food as they move along, even with the newborn.

We have this phrase, that “elephants never forget.” It’s true that their temporal lobe, which is associated with memory, is larger and denser than that of human beings. So that's one reason they say that the elephant never forgets.

About 90% of African elephants have been wiped out in the past century, largely due to the ivory trade. And by now, there’s an added crisis, and that is global warming and the drought, especially happening in Africa.

So when we honor Mother Earth, celebrate Mother Earth, we want to celebrate all our creatures, all our children. And elephants are among the most amazing of Mother Earth’s children. And if we destroy Mother Earth, we are, of course, killing so many beautiful beings, including our own species. Let us celebrate elephants and meditate on them, and ask what they have to teach us, especially in these perilous times.

Thank you. We’ll see you next week.