

The Prince and the Rhinoceros

A folktale from India

Once upon a time in India, a rare white rhinoceros was born. It was given to a noble prince who was very lonely and whose kingdom was poor. The prince was so delighted with the unusual gift that he laughed joyfully. So he named the little calf Great Joy.

The prince treated the rhino with great kindness. He fed him rice, fruit and choice tender plants, and he always spoke in a kind and gentle voice. Great Joy grew and was happy.

The prince thought Great Joy was quite beautiful. At sunrise he would be golden. At sunset, he would be a canvas of pink and red and orange, and later the dark blue of evening. Sometimes after a rain, he would reflect everything around him. He seemed almost enchanted.

"You are wonderful and special to me," the prince whispered softly.

In time, Great Joy grew into an enormous animal with fine horns. He was very strong. One day he thought about his good life with the prince and what he could give him in return. "I am only a rhino, but I can use my strength to help him earn gold for his kingdom."

He suggested to the prince that he compete in a contest of strength against the town's strongest bulls. A rich merchant with many fine oxen agreed to the wager: Great Joy would pull a hundred loaded wagons usually pulled by his team of eight oxen. The bet was one thousand gold pieces.

The next day, the prince inspected the wagons and harnessed Great Joy to the front. Then he climbed onto the driver's seat. Great Joy waited for a few kind words of encouragement before starting. Instead, the prince waved a whip in the air and shouted, "Pull, you big wretch. Move, you worthless rhino."

Great Joy was shocked at his beloved prince's words. Wretch? Worthless? "I'm no wretch," he thought. "I'm not worthless, either." He stiffened his huge legs and refused to move an inch.

The prince was so humiliated that he ran home and hid in his royal bed. "I'm ruined," he cried.

Great Joy was filled with pain and sorrow. He needed to understand what he had done to deserve such cruel insults. After many days and nights without food or sleep, he went to the prince's shabby palace. "Oh, Prince, in all our years together, have I ever done anything to hurt you?"

"No, never."

"Then why did you say those terrible things to me? Was the thought of gold worth more than what I can offer?"

The prince hung his head. Tears ran down his face. "The gold blinded me. I forgot the importance of our friendship. I am so ashamed."

"Then we will try again," said Great Joy. "Go back to the merchant and double your bet."

Again the carts were loaded and Great Joy was harnessed to the front. The prince climbed up and sang out, "All right, you marvelous marvel, you splendid rhino, my Great Joy. It's up to you!"

The powerful rhino snorted, pawed the ground and charged forward. His sides heaved as he pulled, until the last cart crossed the finish line. The townspeople cheered wildly as they covered him with garlands of flowers and strands of tinkling bells.

The prince collected his two thousand pieces of gold, then humbly thanked Great Joy for a job well done. That very evening, the prince and the rhino walked along the river in the red glow of sunset.

"I didn't mean to say such hurtful words to you," the prince whispered. "Please forgive me."

"I already have," said Great Joy.

And that's how they lived forever after — in friendship and great joy. Never an unkind word passed between them. ♦

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