

## FREEDOM FOR THE ELEPHANTS!

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**Original German Text: Martin Zinggl**

*English Translation: Jonathan Nyquist*

Hardly anyone understands elephants as well as American Carol Buckley. For over 40 years, she has worked to improve the lives of elephants in captivity. She is currently in Nepal to free animals tamed in the Asian tradition from their chains. We have accompanied her on her delicate mission.

A PETITE WOMAN with long blonde hair sits in the grass and cuts an elephant's toenail. For Carol Buckley this is obviously routine. The 61-year-old American woman removes stones from the soles of the animal, hones the pads of the feet with a coarse file, and carves out little pieces of overgrown pad or dead skin here and there. She also inspects the wounds on the feet, which are infected.

"Good girl," repeats Buckley in a soft voice while tenderly caressing the wrinkly skin of Raj Kali. For the elephant, the treatment is a new experience. She has been at Tiger Tops Elephant Camp, situated on the northwestern edge of Chitwan National Park, for only a few days. In her 42 years, Raj Kali has rarely experienced loving attention. For 28 years she toiled in the national park, Nepal's largest nature reserve, as a safari elephant, carrying tourists every day on her back, subjected to both physical and psychological abuse. After work, she was chained to the stump of a tree with limited freedom of movement, which led to an accident that brought her here. A wild bull elephant in musth—a yearly surge of testosterone in adult male elephants that makes them extremely aggressive—entered her stable and injured her severely.

"Raj Kali has never recovered from this," explains Carol Buckley. "There was panic in every trumpet and she stopped eating and sleeping." She was no longer usable for work in this state. Finally, Raj Kali's mahout brought her to Buckley at the camp because he had heard that she was working here on a kind of retirement home for elephants.

Now, Raj Kali, stretched out on all fours in the dust, gets a pedicure. It took a while to get used to what Buckley was doing with her feet. Even the mahout with his elephant hook, the traditional dominance tool used to control and correct, who watches directly over her head, cannot prevent Raj Kali from kicking her foot nervously every once in a while.

Finally, Carol Buckley stands up from her trimming and says with a chuckle in her voice, "Hey, sweet girl, stop kicking me." She raises an index finger, then slowly approaches the elephant's head, gently places a hand on her trunk and whispers, "Good girl, you're okay. Can I continue?" As if giving a sign of approval, Raj Kali closes her eyes and, to the amazement of her caregiver, finally sleeps, snoring softly.

The Elephant Camp at Tiger Tops Tharu Village is Carol Buckley's newest project. Nepal's oldest lodge, it is creating a new form of wildlife tourism. A dozen former working elephants get their freedom back here, at least partially. "A compromise," clarifies Buckley, "as it is a life of controlled freedom."

Within a solar powered electric fence designed by Buckley that covers an area of about five football fields, the elephants can move around freely as a herd, without chains, and surrounded by trees, bushes, sand, and lots of juicy green forage. Compared to their previous life circumstances, this is paradise.

As the cost of maintaining elephants is quite high, the animals need to continue attracting tourists, as a way to bring in money. But unlike the past, "Future tourists should entertain the elephants, not vice versa," explains Kristjan Edwards, owner and operator of Tiger Tops Tharu Village and Elephant Camp. A new concept for the camp, which is in its second generation.

"The point is to know and understand the animals, to learn, and to improve their lives," he says. Instead of the previous riding safaris, this new way, "walking beside the elephant" will be offered from now on. And why the sudden change? "I could not bear the sight of my elephants," says Kristjan Edwards, "all day long in chains, standing before me, disturbed, with their heads bobbing back and forth. I felt uncomfortable and it was time to do the right thing."

Of course, such a change needs expertise: the handling of elephants is not easy and not without danger. Around 500 people fall victim annually to elephant attacks worldwide. So Edwards hired the best he could find. Carol Buckley has a reputation as a true elephant expert. She boasts more than 40 years of experience with the gray giants. If anyone knows how elephants think, it is her.

"I don't fear, I respect them. I feel and understand their state of mind, and I respect them if they do not want me close", says Buckley. "We communicate without words. Over the years I have learned to empathize with the elephants, to put myself in their place. These creatures are driven by emotion. Only when one is sensitive to how they feel can you predict how they will behave."



Carol Buckley's career began with a small elephant named Fluffy who was the animal mascot of a local tire store. Fluffy was less than one year old when she walked past Carol's house in California. Carol, a 19-year-old student studying exotic animal training and management, had already heard of her.

"There are no coincidences," she says. She immediately volunteered to care for and train Fluffy. Not long thereafter, the animal had become more important than college; she left her studies and cared for Fluffy full time and soon became an expert without an academic title.

She bought Fluffy from the tire store for \$25,000 and gave the female baby elephant a more dignified name: Tarra. She trained Tarra to perform, so successfully that Tarra soon became a star in film and television. She could roller-skate, hula-hoop, and play the tambourine. Tarra even appeared on the Academy Awards, handing the award envelope to the presenter on stage.

When asked if she feels elephants should be made to perform, Buckley responded "How naive I was! When Tarra was young she had fun but as she aged, she no longer enjoyed performing." Tarra became pregnant and carried her calf full-term but the baby was stillborn.

"That changed everything," explained Buckley. After 19 years of working in zoos and circuses, Buckley wanted something more for Tarra. Buckley wanted Tarra to have more freedom, to have nothing more to do with all of this madness. "I wanted a relationship with my elephant, not control over her. So I let her guide my actions."

Looking for a new home, Buckley and Tarra visited many zoos and animal parks, but in each they found imprisonment and human dominance, no matter how environmentally friendly or well designed the facilities were. "What I had in mind was a safe zone—a sanctuary—where visitors were not permitted and the elephants were given autonomy and a chance to recover from the traumas they had experienced. No control. No commands. No stress. And especially no physical or verbal abuse," explains Buckley.

In 1995, using the profits from their elephant shows, Buckley purchased 100 acres of land in Hohenwald, Tennessee, and founded what has grown to become the largest natural habitat sanctuary for elephants in the US. Finally Tarra could live "in safe freedom" as Buckley calls it.

Over the next 15 years, Buckley freed 23 more elephants from poor conditions in zoos and circuses and expanded the area to 2700 acres, three times the size of New York's Central Park—an elephant's heaven on earth.

"Tarra and the Sanctuary have been my greatest teachers," says Buckley. "There I understood for the first time that I hardly knew anything about elephants. By observing and interacting with them on their terms I learned the essence of my current skills: to understand the elephant, to feel her emotions, and to be sensitive to what she is experiencing."



Traditionally, there are two ways to make an elephant docile. One is based in human dominance and violence. "Breaking" an elephant has a long tradition, especially in Asia. At a young age, the animals are terrorized and robbed of their self-esteem. They are locked in cages or narrow pits and tormented for days with iron bars and sticks with nails, until they give up and lose their will. As a result, the elephants no longer believe in their own strength and power. They suffer from learned

helplessness, remembering past abuse and fearing renewed pain. The memory is so frightening that even a suggestion of an elephant hook is sufficient to force obedience. The elephant can then be used for safari rides or forestry work, for circus shows or polo matches. It will no longer defend itself. This method of breaking an elephant's spirit has been preserved for over 5,000 years.

The other way of making an elephant docile, preferred by Carol Buckley, is certainly appropriate for the species, but it requires far more effort. Essentially, it relies on understanding the feelings and needs of the elephant to build a stable relationship with the animal. Control without violence. Elephants should no longer be regarded as an instrument of work or a source of income, but as a wild animal, an “oversized friend” who deserves respect and affection. And this method works, swears Buckley.

In Nepal, however, not everyone is convinced that this is a real alternative.



How Buckley found her way to her mission in Asia from the United States is a sad story. In 2010, she had a falling-out with her former colleagues in Hohenwald and was forced out of her own life's work. Ever since, she has not even been allowed on the property, which means she has also not been allowed to see Tarra.

Buckley immediately founded Elephant Aid International and set out to help captive-held elephants in Asia. She launched the Chain Free Means Pain Free campaign to free working elephants in Asia from their chains.

Bit by bit, Buckley visited countries where elephants are used for safari rides and other work in captivity: India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Nepal. There she tried to convince authorities, elephant owners, and their keepers that elephants deserve a bit of freedom. In many cases she has convinced owners to build chain-free enclosures with solar powered electric fencing. “It’s a trade-off,” explains Buckley. “In the enclosure, they can move freely at least a few hours a day. But they cannot escape their difficult working life outside the corral.”

Initially Buckley's ideas were thought impractical, but “now public and private establishments that keep elephants are contacting me to ask for my advice and experience.” Altogether, 105 pachyderms in captivity have already experienced a little freedom. It's not the world, but it's a start. And it's better than nothing.

“Sure, I dream of all Asian elephants being able to live freely,” says Buckley, “but I am also a realist. That will not happen but I can do my part to ensure that their welfare is improved.” The time spent in the fenced, open-air enclosures accelerates the healing of the beaten animals immensely. “For the overall picture, this changes nothing, but for the individual, every hour without chains or human dominance counts. You can feel the enormous burden that falls off their shoulders when the elephants realize they are able to walk around unfettered. It is worth every financial and physical investment.”

Once, says Buckley, an entire herd of elephants came to the fence minutes after they were released from chains. “They lined up in a row in front of me and engaged in a group vocalization of squeaks, rumbles, and trumpets. The volunteers who were watching said it was the elephants’ way of saying thank you. These moments drive me forward.”



The next morning Carol Buckley has breakfast with the mahouts of the Elephant Camp. Twelve men in olive green uniforms and worn-out flip-flops sit in the sparsely furnished canteen. The men are scooping lentils and rice into their mouths with their hands and are excited about what the guest from a world completely alien to them has to say.

“Can anyone explain to me,” the woman with the husky-blue eyes asks, “why we are building these enclosures here at the Elephant Camp?” Silence. Questioning faces. One drums his brittle fingertips nervously on the weathered wooden table; another shuffles his worn sandals on and off. Otherwise, eloquent silence.

It is not just the language barrier or the typical Nepalese timid politeness toward foreigners. The mahouts are under pressure. They are afraid of losing their jobs or even their lives. They worry that their dominance over the elephants will be taken away once the chains are loosened, and that the elephants will seek vengeance for all the harassment.

“The problem is to find a balance between the new freedom in the enclosure and maintain reasonably obedient, non-aggressive elephants,” explains Buckley.

But the mahouts fear this exercise, as it turns out. “We will never get the elephants out of the pen,” grumbles one of the men. “You will!” answers a determined Buckley. “With positive coaxing and treats like orange slices and pieces of apple.”

A murmur goes through the room. “What are kind words anyhow?” wonders one of the mahouts. “We will only lose our authority!” shouts another.

Convinced of her success, Buckley smiles gently to calm tempers. “Everything will be fine,” she says. “You men are talented trainers and your elephants are better behaved than any I have ever seen. If your elephant is relaxed, she will follow your command. She quickly learns the difference between life inside and outside the chain free corral.”

The seriousness on the faces of the mahouts gradually softens and they begin to show cautious interest in Buckley’s idea. The group talks among themselves; eventually, the insight breaks through.

“We are creating something new, something historic, an experiment—and we look

forward to it." Everyone applauds but some of the 26 mahouts remain skeptical. "But what does she know anyhow?!" a few mahouts whisper to each other later.

"The elephants are the easy part," says Buckley. "People, are the challenge—especially if they have lived for decades with an unchanging tradition. Elephants reflect the demeanor of the mahouts, both the positive and negative sentiments. If the caregiver, for example, shows a fear of failure, the elephants also feel fear. That is why they are sometimes aggressive. Ideally the mahouts display confidence without elephant hooks—and that radiates out to the elephants."

Each mahout who develops respect for the elephant and her emotional life, Buckley is convinced, will immediately have a better relationship with his elephant. "Only a few of them understand how their behavior affects the elephant. But, in fact, the elephants don't hide their emotions at all. They show both their fear and anger, as well as their good humor. You just have to look carefully. But the culture in many Asian countries prevents the mahouts from showing any emotions except anger. And many have no desire to engage emotionally with the elephants; therefore, they have little understanding."



Not even 20 kilometers east of Tiger Tops Elephant Camp, this world-view is on display in its purest form in Sauraha, the tourist center of Chitwan National Park. Around 200 elephants live in the village; about a third of them belong to the government of Nepal. The government elephants are privileged compared to their privately owned counterparts, because they have been allowed to live in one of Carol Buckley's chain-free corrals in the evenings.

The privately owned elephants' dreary workday has not changed. Each day, hundreds of tourists ride on their backs into Chitwan National Park in search of other wild animals. Nothing is majestic about them, neither in their appearance nor in occurrence. The emaciated bodies are covered with arm-length scars, bruises, and abscesses. Most have knock-knees, an obstacle to walking—just one of the many consequences of chains the elephants have worn since childhood. Other injuries are the sore feet—for the extremely heavy animals, the most important body part.

"The scars on their psyche remain invisible," says Carol Buckley. "Most of the elephants suffer from post-traumatic stress. They are neurotic and depressed, and when they are depressed, their bodies are more vulnerable to disease—that's why most of these elephants are sick."

For tourists, it is easy to overlook the suffering. In Sauraha, they are distracted by a colorful spectacle: pink cotton candy, mountains of tangerines and peanuts, golden-brown fried dough, and everywhere there are saris, umbrellas, and selfie-sticks in all shades of color, from absinthe green to lemon yellow.

"Sauraha is the epitome of hell on earth for elephants," says Buckley. Here, two

worlds collide: while the mostly unsuspecting tourists have the time of their lives, the frustrated elephants struggle toward the end of the day. “They live in constant fear, suppress all of their will, and follow orders with humility and patience, to avoid being punished by their mahout.”

When asked if such long-suffering elephants can benefit from a chain-free corral, “yes” says a determined Buckley. “A few hours of freedom every day is so much more than they previously had.”



The next day, there is nervous unrest in the afternoon heat of the Elephant Camp. The first of five planned enclosures is completed. Buckley runs frantically up and down to measure the electrical voltage in the fence’s wiring and to ensure the inside of the corral is free of debris. The smell of fresh elephant dung and the scent of bittersweet cannabis plants mingle in a light breeze. A priest performs a religious ceremony: for the Hindu elephant god Ganesh, he sacrifices sweets and fruits, lights incense, and scatters pink hibiscus blossoms. Then he blesses the ground at the entrance to the enclosure as well as the control box that houses the energizer and battery for the corral fence, which is charged by a solar panel suspended above.

In the background, heavy chains fall to the ground. Today these elephants get their freedom in the Elephant Camp at Tiger Tops Lodge. It is the biggest enclosure Carol Buckley has ever built in Nepal. The elephants nervously swing their heads back and forth; they sense something is in the air. The priest prints a tika on each elephant’s trunk—the sign of a blessing in the form of a paste of dried rice, flour, and natural red dye. Buckley, the mahouts, and everyone else attending receives a red thumbprint on the forehead as well.

To thunderous applause, Buckley cuts the ribbon and opens the gate.

Freed from their chains, the elephants are confused at first and stand still after walking only a few meters, but then they celebrate with their own initiation ritual: they dig their trunks into the sand and dust their backs. Suddenly, they let go, smacking their trunks on the ground, squeaking and trumpeting, rumbling and roaring, booming and calling, growling and purring happily in long and deep tones.

The ground shakes. Carol Buckley’s hands tremble; she fights back tears. “It is so simple,” she murmurs, “and yet it means so much to these giants.” The mahouts cannot resist a smile, visibly stirred by the spectacle. Carol Buckley thanks each of them for the confidence they’ve shown.

Before the morning sun brightens the sky and illuminates the foothills of the Himalayas, the Nepalese soldiers who protect the national park from poachers are making their morning rounds. Carol Buckley is also up. She stands at the main entrance of the freshly completed enclosure, observing the elephants before their most important test. After their first night of freedom, they must leave their gated

terrain to go swimming in the river and graze with their mahouts.

Buckley has advised the men to line up in a row and call their elephants from a distance. Initially, nothing happens. It is a test of patience, to which both parties must become accustomed. “The mahouts do not even know how much dominance they have over their elephants,” whispers Buckley. And indeed, one by one, the elephants return to their caretakers—without threats, without beatings, without pressure. It is easy to read the relief breaking across the faces of the mahouts. Carol Buckley smiles with satisfaction.

Mission accomplished.



### **Captions and notes by page:**

#### **Cover: FREEDOM FOR THE ELEPHANTS!**

Carol Buckley has freed mistreated elephants from their chains. No one understands these mighty elephants as well as she.

**p. 42:** Chained bull elephant in Chitwan National Park in Nepal: the extremely restricted freedom of movement for these animals is a living hell.

**p. 44:** Carol Buckley firmly believes that elephants can be coaxed through handling. She has no need for the classic elephant hook.

**p. 45:** “For me, there is nothing to fear. I feel and understand their frame of mind, and I respect them if they do not want me close to them.”

**p. 46:** In the enclosures erected by Carol Buckley, the elephants can move freely, without chains and commands. It’s easy for observers to understand what this means for these animals.

**p. 48:** Now the female elephant, stretched out on all fours in the dust, gets a pedicure. It takes a while to grow accustomed to it.

#### **p. 51:**

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2. Elephant pedicure: “Hey! Stop kicking me, girl!”

3. A walk with happy elephants: “In the future, tourists should entertain the elephants, not vice versa.”

4. Carol Buckley on her mission with mahouts: “When the elephant is relaxed, she follows your orders without violence.”



5. Information sign in Chitwan National Park: For many of these gray giants, this is the epitome of hell.

6. From the savage harnesses of the trained elephants: “The scars on the soul remain, on the other hand, invisible.”

**p. 52:** Hollywood Tarra. Carol Buckley introduced her elephant to all sorts of feats: Tarra could rollerskate, hula-hoop, and play the tambourine. She even handed out an Oscar.

**p. 53:**

1. Carol Buckley documents her work in words and pictures. Here she photographs the Camp’s first two free-roaming elephants.

2. Mahout housing with a previously chained elephant. Soon the land is transformed into an open-air habitat with a fenced enclosure.

3. Mahout with his elephant: “Many have no desire to engage emotionally with the elephant.”

**p. 54:** All day in Sauraha, wrecks of elephants carry tourists through the jungle. A cruel safety measure: overnight, working elephants remain on chains.

**p. 55:** Sandwiches for elephants: an elephant eats about 150kg of food per day.

Dusk at Tiger Tops Lodge: “An elephant’s life in controlled freedom”

**p. 57:** Elephant ride attractions: Frustrated elephants torment themselves to get through their day.

**p. 58:** Finishing touches: Carol Buckley vigorously wrestles a post into place for the new enclosure at Tiger Tops Lodge.

Is the Asian elephant disappearing?

Rating: highly endangered.

Even during the 19th century, Asian elephants were spread throughout South Asia, from China in the east to Syria in the west. Today, the largest living land animal can be found only in certain parts of the wild: the population totals just 30,000. By comparison, fifty years ago there were 160,000. The additional 15,000 elephants kept as working animals offer little help to the population: in captivity, they breed very poorly.

The reasons for the dramatic decimation are familiar: the continuing reduction of habitat through deforestation, conflicts with farmers, and the illegal hunting of bull elephants for their ivory tusks.

When compared to their cousins in Asia, the state of the African elephant is downright superb; the population is still around 500,000.

**p. 60:** Up close—elephants come up to the fence of the Elephant Camp: “It is so simple, and yet it means so much to these giants.”

**Beginning of a great passion.**

As the baby elephant, Fluffy, ran past Carol Buckley’s window, it happened to her. She bought the animal for \$25,000 and would later become an elephant expert.