

She Chose This Path

By Liv Baker, PhD

She pauses.

Not because anyone has asked her to. Not because the path ends or the bamboo runs out. She pauses because she has decided to — and in that stillness, something important is happening.

Her name is Paw Ray. She is thirty-one years old, and she is standing in a forest in northern Thailand in the early morning, ears slightly forward, trunk drifting toward a cluster of vines she noticed a moment ago. The mahout who has known her for years has come to find her. There is a greeting between them, brief and familiar, and then she turns back to the vines. He already knows: she's choosing. She'll be here for a while.

I have spent years studying elephants like Paw Ray, not in zoos or tourist camps, but in native forests where they roam with their elephant families, living largely on their own terms. The mahouts who know them, members of indigenous communities whose families have lived alongside elephants for generations, move in and out of their world, checking in, watching over, maintaining a relationship built across years. My work is about something that science hasn't always taken seriously: who an elephant is, as an individual, with her own history, her own relationships, her own way of moving through the world. What it means for her to live a full life. To be, in some genuine sense, *free*.

What we talk about when we talk about freedom

Most of us who love elephants know the broad outlines of their world. We know they are matriarchal, led by the oldest and wisest female, whose memory of water sources and migration routes spans decades. We know they grieve. We know they play. We know they love.

Beneath all of this — the grief, the play, the love — there is something we talk about less often. Something that makes these things possible in the first place.

I've come to think of it as *autonomy* — the elephant's capacity to make choices, to express preferences, to shape the texture of her own day. Not freedom in the abstract sense of roaming an endless wild landscape, but the small, daily freedoms that add up

to a life: which direction to walk, when to rest, whether to approach or to hang back, when to reach out and touch a companion with the tip of her trunk.

These choices matter. They are not trivial.

In my research with elephants living within indigenous communities in Thailand, we found something that moved me deeply: the more an elephant engaged with her natural environment, connected with other elephants, and followed her own impulses to groom and play, the more she expressed what we could only call psychological wildness, something that looked, plainly, like herself.

Knowing an elephant

There is a kind of knowledge that lives beyond what we can measure, and it is, I've come to believe, the deeper picture. It comes in two forms, and both matter.

The first comes from tradition — generations of people who have lived and worked with elephants, building up a body of practical knowledge about how elephants behave, what they need, and how to be in their presence.

The second is more intimate. It is the knowledge that comes from being in relationship with a specific elephant, over time. The people I work with, those who have lived alongside these specific elephants for years, sometimes decades, have come to know who each elephant is, her temperament, her preferences, her rhythms at different times of day. They can often predict which path she will take through the forest, which direction she will turn at a familiar junction, where she will choose to rest on a warm afternoon. This isn't guesswork. It is the knowledge of someone who has paid close attention to another being for a very long time.

They notice when her breathing changes. When her gait is half a beat different. When she pauses at a spot she passed without interest yesterday and today finds arresting. What they know, through years of this attention, is when an elephant is being herself and when she is not, when she is moving through the world with intention and ease, and when something has shifted.

My research has tried to put language and evidence around something they already understood: that an elephant's wellbeing is inseparable from her ability to express who she is.

She is coming to know you, too

The relationship, it turns out, runs both ways: the elephant is not simply the one being known. She is coming to know you, too.

Elephants distinguish between individual humans. They read us — our voices, our movements, our intentions, our states of mind. They form impressions that deepen over time. The person who has earned an elephant's trust has done so through accumulated interactions that the elephant has been quietly assessing all along. And an elephant who is uncertain, or uncomfortable, or simply uninterested, will communicate that too, if we know how to look, and if we are willing to accept what we see.

This changes what it means to be in relationship with an elephant. It means the relationship is not ours to define unilaterally. She has a perspective on it. She may want to engage, or she may not. She may welcome your presence on a given morning, or she may have other ideas about how her day should go. To be in good relation with an elephant is to hold that complexity with honesty, to recognize that she brings her own knowledge, her own history, her own assessment of who you are, to every interaction.

That is not a burden. It is, I think, an extraordinary gift. To be known by an elephant, even a little, is to be in the presence of a mind that is genuinely taking you in.

What "being heard" looks like

An elephant voices herself in ways that are easy to miss if you don't know to look. It isn't always trumpeting. It's the small redirect, the gentle turn away from something she doesn't want to do. The approach she initiates, on her own terms. The way she lingers at a particular stand of trees that delights her for reasons only she fully knows.

The relationships that support elephant wellbeing most powerfully, I find, are not the ones without any compromise or negotiation — they are the ones where the elephant can signal what she wants, and be understood. Where a refusal is respected. Where her voice, however quiet, counts.

This is what I mean when I say that the question at the center of my work is: *what is it like to be this elephant, in this relationship, in this place?* It isn't a mystical question. It lives in the particular — in this elephant, this forest, this morning. And the answer changes how we think about what it means to be in relation with them.

A different kind of relationship

Paw Ray eventually moves on from the vines. She finds a dusty patch of ground and lowers herself into it, working the earth into her skin with quiet absorption. After a while she rises and moves toward the others, drawn by something — a sound, a presence, a pull we can only guess at. Her mahout waits nearby. I close my notebook. She doesn't look back. She is already somewhere else, somewhere that is entirely hers.

What my research keeps returning to is a simple but demanding idea: that elephants are individuals, with their own knowledge, their own preferences, their own sense of how a life should go. To be in relation with them well is to take that seriously, not just in principle, but in practice, in the small decisions of every day.

Paw Ray is still rolling in the dust when I close my notebook. Whatever she is experiencing, and I believe she is experiencing something real and rich and hers, she came to this moment herself.

She chose this path.

*Liv Baker, PhD, is a conservation behaviorist whose work centers on the inner lives of animals — who they are, what they know, and what it means for them to live well. She is Research Director at [Mahouts Elephant Foundation](#) and Chair of [PAN Works](#), an animal ethics think tank, and has spent years in the forests of Thailand studying Asian elephants alongside the indigenous communities who have lived with them for generations. Her research published in *Society & Animals* (2025) introduced autonomy as a measure of elephant wellbeing.*