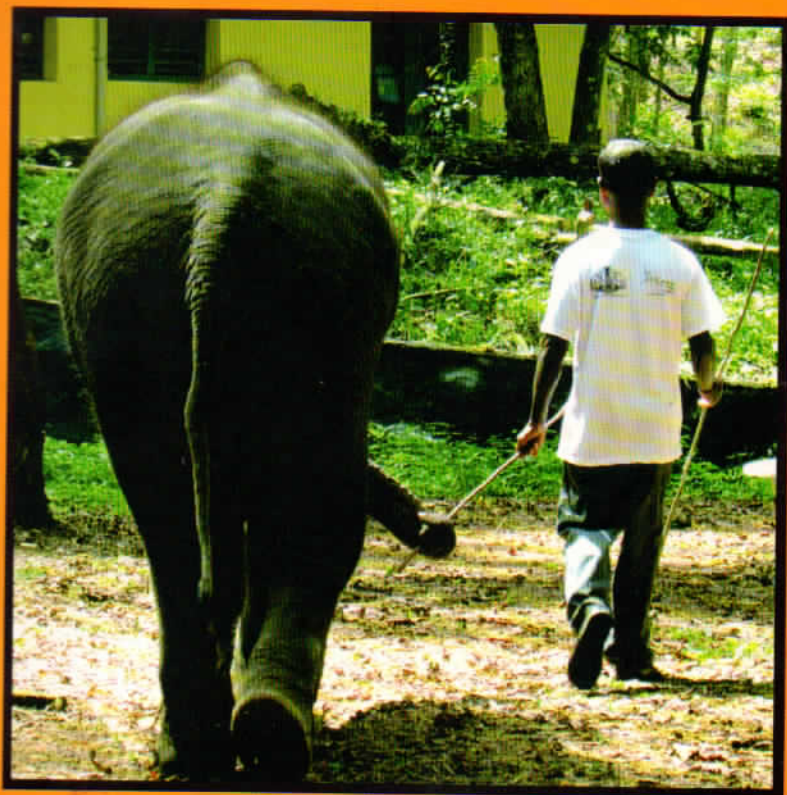


CONSERVATION REFERENCE SERIES No.9

# Hasthisiksha

A Manual on Humane Training of Elephant Calves Destined for Permanent Captivity



**Andrew McLean**



KERALA FOREST DEPARTMENT



Wildlife  
Trust  
of India

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**WORKING  
ANIMALS  
AUSTRALIA**



Human Elephant  
Learning Programs

# Hasthisiksha

A Manual on Humane Training of Elephant  
Calves Destined for Permanent Captivity

**Andrew McLean**

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Vivek Menon  
Ashraf, NVK  
Divya Bhardwaj



**Working  
Animals  
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Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) is a leading Indian nature conservation organisation that works to protect threatened species and habitats. Its mission is to conserve wildlife and its habitat and to work for the welfare of individual wild animals, in partnership with communities and governments.

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### **Disclaimer**

This manual 'Hasthisiksha' ('art of training elephants') has been produced as a handbook, primarily for the mahouts and elephant trainers who participated in the training workshops held in Kerala and Assam, 2014. However, this should not deter others outside these states from using this. The training methods outlined in this manual have been field-tested and refined by Dr Andrew McLean during the training workshops held in Nepal, Assam and Kerala. In principle, the science of training animals should be the same across all taxa, but some of the procedures mentioned in this manual may not be applicable for training wild caught elephants, more so with adults and sub-adults.

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# Foreword

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**Dated: 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2014**

## Foreword

Asian elephant is a heritage animal of India which is revered and adored by all in the country. Despite large size and food requirements, this predominantly wild animal has also been kept in captivity and a very close human bond develops between the animal and its handler. The art of taming and keeping elephants captive has been a long tradition in India and can be traced to as early as the Vedic times. It can be even assumed that this art was pioneered in the Indian subcontinent. Although the utility of these elephants for conventionally hard labor work like warfare, transportation and logging has now been reduced owing to advent of modern techniques, the 4000 odd population of captive elephants still exists in 24 states and Union territories of India.

These numbers are dynamic with the successful breeding of some of these elephants, giving rise to the captive born calves that are recruited for training as working elephants. Although the tradition of training elephants is time proven, it raises some serious welfare concerns. To address these concerns organizations like Working for Animals INC, Wildlife Trust of India and Dr. Andrew Mclean came forward with the innovative idea of infusing science into tradition of training captive elephants. Having conducted multiple workshops, which focused on training of elephant trainers and *Mahouts* on use of techniques based on the "learning theory" and discouraging punishment as a method of reinforcement.

Emanating from these set of workshops, this training manual in 5 Indian languages widely spoken in areas with traditions of elephant keeping (Assamese, Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada and Tamil) apart from English will not only be the first publication of its kind, but also form a valuable asset for propagating and implementing this novel knowledge and contribute to better welfare prospects of India's heritage animal.

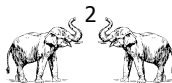
**(S.K. Khanduri)**



## Preface

Elephants have been in captivity in India for close to 3000 years. First as war machines, then as lumber operators and now as occasional charioteers of divinity and the incredible Indian tourist, elephants have served the Indian like no other wild animal. Of late, this age old relationship has been severely tested, by its irrelevance in modern society, by the increasing conflict between man and beast and even more fundamentally by an increasing consciousness of the ethical conundrums that it poses. The Elephant Task Force is clear in the recommendation given in its landmark report Gajah and I quote "In the long run, the Task Force favours the complete phasing out of elephants from commercial captivity. However, for the present, it aims to bring the upkeep to the highest standards through a synthesis of the finest traditions of elephant care including mahout practice and of modern scientific knowledge and practices accompanied by better regulation and monitoring".

However, this work of reference by Andrew McLean is not really about wither captivity, but instead is a pragmatic manual to change one embarrassing aspect of the relationship that requires emergent attention; the cruelty meted out to the elephant by man during its training and sometimes due to the wrong foundations laid during trainings intermittently throughout its long and sensitive life. Traditional ways have regrettably used the 'punish' rather than 'reward' method of training and also dwelt a lot on 'breaking the will' of the wild animal. This cannot be faulted when one thinks of how ancient this tradition is and how ancient man out of fear of this wild beast, the largest in his land, tamed it according to his best measure. He beat it, tied it and starved it. If it responded he untied it, rode it and then chained it. If it retaliated, he tied it again and beat it and starved it. Many centuries of this traditional shame continued hidden amidst the vast glories of the man-animal relationship. Andrew McLean comes from a more urbane animal training school, that of the horse. In training the equine, he realised that the Pavlovian reaction to reward was for animals, especially intelligent animals, a far more humane method to training than these traditional methods. Having said that, it must have taken him much toil and time to adjust that set of thoughts to fit the elephant and also to incorporate into science, that which was sound and humane in the traditional methods.



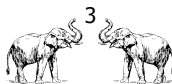
Over the last few years Andrew McLean assisted by HELP has been visiting us at the WTI and we have jointly organised these alternate methods of training so that the elephants in captivity (and India has close to 4000 of these) are trained in a humane manner. Those who feel that elephants should never be kept in captivity may well have a moral stand that is correct. But in practice the knowledge that 4000 elephants are with us willy-nilly over the next hundred years and that despite all the efforts of organisations such as the Wildlife Trust of India and the International Fund for Animal Welfare of showing models of putting back elephant orphans, elephants still come into captivity out of conflict or temporary displacements makes this manual invaluable. If elephants must come into captivity then welfare to these near persons is an uncompromisable value. And of the several major and minor indignities that we heap on this most noble of our creatures, the early torture of training is one that modern society can do without.

The beauty of this manual by Andrew McLean, HELP and WTI is that it is simple yet based on sound scientific principles of welfare based training; it is based itself on traditional practices and is yet futuristic in its ambit; and most importantly it has been tried and tested now in Nepal, Assam and Kerala.

I see this as one of the major contributions to animal welfare in India and if mahouts across the land can adopt it, the country will be a kinder place for elephants.

**Vivek Menon**

Executive Director and CEO, WTI  
Regional Director, South Asia, IFAW





## **Acknowledgments**

None of this work would be possible without the invaluable support of Mr Vivek Menon, Director of IFAW South Asia and Founder, Executive Director and CEO of the Wildlife Trust of India.

Instrumental to my work has been Dr NVK Ashraf, Chief Veterinarian, WTI. My sincere thanks to him for his support and friendship over the years.

To Christine Townend, patron of the HELP Foundation and the charity 'Working for Animals' I am most indebted for their support and funding assistance over the years.

I also owe my thanks to the trainers, officials and mahouts in Assam and Kerala, India for their enthusiasm and unfathomable contribution not only to this book but also to my knowledge in elephant training. In addition, I could not have achieved so much without the assistance of my translators in Assam (Kaushik Barua and Dr Bhaskar Choudhury) and in Kerala (Ramith Meledath and Jose Louies).

I must also thank the WEPA and the officials and mahouts of Bardia and Chitwan, Nepal for the invaluable experience I gained there.

To Ben Fulton-Gillon for his photography, support and good travelling company, I owe my thanks.

Finally, my sincere gratitude to Portland Jones and Nicki Stuart for their helpful suggestions, editing and proof reading and to Jane Myers for her invaluable assistance in this production.

**Andrew McLean**



# 1. Introduction

Of all animals, elephants are among the most intelligent. They have been described as 'near persons' and there are certainly many similarities between our species. Like people, and a few other animals, they can use tools owing to their dexterous trunks. Like people, if they are treated well and their training is clear, consistent and fair, they remain happy. Unfortunately though, like people, when subject to pain that they cannot escape, predict or do not understand, they can become aggressive. They can harbour this aggression for many years.

Elephants have been trained for thousands of years and this knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation. In the same way as horse training, it has been based on ideas of dominance over elephants and this makes the learning process slow, inefficient and sometimes dangerous. On the other hand, what is now known about animal learning is very recent. This new knowledge is easy to understand for both people and elephants.

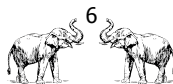
In addition to improved safety, this training is many times faster than traditional training. This is because it is based more precisely on the elephant's learning



**Fig. 1: Elephant training and management has been well-documented in ancient art and literature. From the Hastividya (Publication Board of Assam, 1974).**

systems and avoids punishment which slows down learning. All it requires is 20 minutes every day or every second day and you will be riding the elephant freely in a very short time. However, you will see that it is also very similar to traditional training and has been largely influenced by many of the methods, signals, riding techniques and goals of traditional systems. So, it really isn't all that different to the ways you already know. The only big difference is in the more subtle use of pressure, timing and the way behaviours are built, motivated and rewarded.

I strongly encourage you to follow this manual as closely as possible and you can be assured that not only will you have trained a bold and willing elephant for life, but a happier and safer one in all circumstances.



## 2. Training Theory and Principles

Before we begin there are a few things that you should understand.

Firstly, the elephant doesn't do things to please us or to make us angry, he does things to please himself. Mostly, this is either about remembering a reaction he gave that instantly caused any pressure on his body to diminish (in other words what made him comfortable), or remembering a reaction that instantly resulted in food.

Secondly, he makes associations between the regular things we do (voice commands and signals) and his own reactions. If he gets rewarded by removal of pressure or food, he repeats these and soon he forms the habit of reacting to our signals in the same way. This gives him a feeling of security because everything is predictable, and this security makes him brave in challenging situations. Punished animals are much less brave.

There are just five elements of animal learning that you should become familiar with that make training easier to understand. These apply to all animals that are trained.

### Training Processes and Definitions

**Habituation:** Is when an animal becomes accustomed to things in its environment. For example, an elephant has to get used to certain things, such as Weight of mahout on his back and the noises of birds and other elephants.

**Pressure-Release:** Is when the elephant is rewarded by comfort. If the elephant is pressured with a stick and he finds that if he steps backward the pressure goes away, he will soon think that the walking backward will remove the pressure and make him comfortable each time. So, a trainer has to remember to always remove the pressure the instant the elephant attempts the correct response. He has to remember to use it at the same place too. Soon the elephant only needs a very small pressure for the trainer to get the same response. This pressure-release training works in all situations. That is, if the elephant shakes until the mahout falls off, the elephant now knows that



shaking removes the mahout. It is important, especially in early training, to ensure that the elephant doesn't learn any incorrect responses this way.

**Reward:** Is when you give the elephant something he wants straight after he has done a particular behaviour. If food is given each time the elephant lifts his leg, he will soon think that if he lifts his leg food will come. We can also promise the elephant that food will come if we pair it with a specific and unique word or sound such as the long universal sound of affirmation '*athe athe*'. So, as soon as the elephant does something we want, we say '*athe athe*' and then reward him with food. The word tells the elephant that reward is coming.

There is another reward that is important in social animals such as elephants. Stroking the elephant on the top of his head on one of the two prominences can also be an important and effective tactile reward and can later replace food when behaviours are consolidated. Stroking should come in after the voice '*athe athe*' but before the food, so that it also predicts the food. Stroking followed by food is then a double reward. Patting should not be used as it is not rewarding, as I will describe later.

**Learning New Signals:** When food or pressure-release is established, new signals can be added to produce the same responses. If we always begin cues with very light pressure, the elephant soon learns that if he responds to the light pressure then he can avoid the stronger pressure. If we want to teach a voice command, it works best if the word comes before the light pressure. So, the trainer has to remember to not only use pressure in the same places but also to use the same voice command each time before the pressure. Later on, when a behaviour is consolidated, additional sites on the elephant's body and extra voice signals for the same response can be added. But you should work on establishing simple, consistent signals first. Every signal has to be in a sequence, that is, one immediately follows another. If you give two signals together (i.e. voice and pressure) you will either inhibit the learning of one signal, or else the signals will only work as a pair, but not on their own. Therefore, training reactions from your signals in the young elephant should be understood as a chain of events as shown in the diagram below:

**Voice Command** ⇨ **Light Pressure** ⇨ **Increase Pressure** ⇨ **Release Pressure** ⇨ **Praise and Stroking** ⇨ **Food**



**Building Habits:** This is about building the behaviours you want and turning them into solid habits. It means that you have to break down what you want into the smallest beginning of the reaction that you want, and then set it up again and reward and repeat it. For example, training an elephant to sit involves progressively rewarding him for lowering his hind quarters. Better still, if you see him doing something on his own that you would like him to learn from a voice command like sitting, say the voice command as he does it then reward him for doing it. When you repeat the same thing over and over again, the elephant soon learns to do things by habit. The best trained elephant has the best trained habits. Your job is to build good habits.

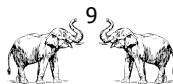
## Starting Early

An elephant learns about his world from the moment he is born. As he learns, habits begin to form. In the training and breeding camps therefore, it is not only possible but also very useful to consistently familiarise the young elephant to some very basic commands which will form a solid foundation for life. Therefore, this manual recommends that some simple training of the elephant begins at a very early age, soon after it is born so that confusion is minimised.

## The Training Environment

The most important aspect of the place you train the young elephant is that it should be free of distractions as much as possible. It doesn't matter if the area is in the jungle or in the camp itself, so long as there are no other things going on that take the elephant's attention. This also includes the young elephant's own needs – he should not be too hungry and he should not be thirsty or suffer other deprivations. The very young elephant should not be trained while he is separated from his mother if he has never been accustomed to her absence.

Another important aspect of the training environment is that there should not be too many people involved in the training. Only one person should give a voice command or a pressure signal and only one response should be asked for at any moment in time until the response is completed. If there are too many people helping in training the elephant, he may become confused and possibly overwhelmed.



Take your time and be patient. Don't allow your frustrations to affect your training or else the elephant will become anxious. Elephants read people very well.

## **Bonding**

Young elephants are like young children. They need guidance and direction but they also need affection and attachment. Spend time being with the young elephant and teach the lessons often but don't overdo it. Try to set up the right reaction. If you know it's a bad time to get the elephant's attention because his mother has just departed, then choose another time. However, feed time can be a good time to train as you can ask the elephant to give a certain response before you give him food. The more you train the elephant to do different responses, the deeper the bond you make between yourself and the elephant. Communication makes bonds! Aggressive elephants (apart from bulls in musth) are the result of inconsistent and unreliable communication and training.



**Fig. 2: Spend time bonding with the young elephant, stroking his body and accustoming him to a soothing voice.**

Affection also deepens the bond between you and the elephant. Do spend time just being with the elephant and focus on stroking his body and especially the two prominent bulbs on his head. As you will see, we will be incorporating this into our reward system. Avoid patting. Patting doesn't help the elephant learn things and it doesn't make the elephant feel comfortable. Stroking the elephant is far more comforting and it is also a reward with a value that changes according to the elephant's security and emotional state.

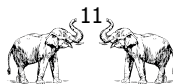
## **Food Rewards**

As soon as the baby elephant can take food (around nine months), then food that he likes can be used as a reward. Generally, it is best to use food that the elephant likes most of all, such as palm sugar, sugarcane, salted coconut palm-stalks or banana. Food should be given in small amounts otherwise the elephant is still eating when you are ready for the next repetition or he may soon lose his eagerness for food. For example a piece of palm sugar the size of your thumbnail or a piece of sugarcane or palm stalk the length of your thumb are sufficient sized rewards to make the elephant want to repeat the behaviour that produced the food.

People often think that giving food is a bad idea as it can make the elephant pushy and aggressive. However, so long as you only give the elephant food directly into his mouth (except of course when he is ridden you give it to his trunk) he will not use his trunk to harass you for food. When you reward an elephant directly into his mouth with food, he will raise his trunk, thus disabling it as a means to obtain food. Food rewards, when used properly, greatly help the elephant to learn faster. Food rewards make the elephant want to stay at 'school' and they deepen the bond between human and elephant. Elephants have big appetites so they don't tire of food as fast as other animals, so you can get many repetitions for each response.

## **Don't Let the Elephant Displace You**

It is important to remember that elephants are quick to learn that they can control you, and it all begins when he learns he can push you. Therefore, when the elephant moves his head, body or trunk toward you, in a way that may make you lean away or step away from him, you should avoid leaning







**Fig. 3: To avoid being molested by the elephant's trunk in search for food, reward the young elephant with food directly to his mouth during on-the-ground training. This ensures that the trunk stays out of the way. Later on, however, when the mahout is astride the elephant, food is then delivered via the trunk.**

or stepping away. Instead you should push his head or trunk away so that he learns to move from your signals. If he manages to move you, he may attempt to repeat it with more force next time. When training the baby elephant, be careful not to allow this situation to arise so that he never learns to remove people. This is an advantage of training the elephant at a very young age; you can establish rules of good behaviour. Each time he puts his trunk towards you and makes you change what you are doing, push his trunk back firmly and continue with what you are doing. It is easy for aggression to escalate if you allow the elephant to learn incorrect behaviours early in his life. Importantly, when control is inconsistent or variable, confusion and frustration can lead to increased aggression.

## Use Good Opportunities

There are many occasions in the elephant's life that may present ideal opportunities. For example, washing the young elephant in the river or going on a grazing trek may be ideal moments to lay across and eventually sit on the young elephant. The river might also be an ideal time to establish behaviours such as sitting and laying-down as the elephant is naturally prone to do these behaviours when in the water.

When you see the young elephant doing something you eventually want to train, say the appropriate voice command '*iriyaane/kidayaane*' (*iri-aane, kida-aane*) if possible just before he does it. For example, if the elephant is about to lay down in a river or a place where he is accustomed to laying down, say the word as early as you can and even reward him with food (so it's a good idea to have some food always handy. This may seem inconvenient, but it will pay off enormously in the future).



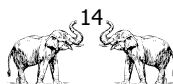
**Fig. 4: If you see the elephant doing a random movement that you might want him to do at some point later from a voice command, say the appropriate word as early as possible just before he begins the behaviour.**

You can also encourage him to touch objects and eventually pick them up (especially with a bit of palm sugar on the stick). You should teach him the appropriate word '*edaane*' (*edu-aane*), by saying the word just before you throw the object on the ground. You would then gradually reward him for picking it up higher or for longer, as well as begin teaching him to give it to you using the voice command for give '*kondu vaa aane*'. If you see the baby elephant stepping forward or back, use the appropriate voice command '*nadayaane/isettiyaane*' (*nada-aane/isetti-aane*) and by repetition and association, the elephant will come to know the voice commands. Remember good timing is essential – try to use your voice at the earliest part of the response – in other words as soon as you get a hint of the reaction, say the word and reward the response.

## **Repetition, Reward and Recency**

For elephants to learn correct habits, you have to repeat a few times and reward each time, especially in the early stages of learning, this makes the elephant aware of the fact that what he has just done is right. For each repetition, reward with the voice praise '*athe athe*' the exact moment he gives the right response, followed by head stroking (on one of the two prominences on the elephant's forehead) and then a food reward. This sequence of three makes a powerful reward system (to make the elephant want to repeat the behaviour). It is important to remember that you must 'pay' the word '*athe athe*' every time you say it. Think of '*athe athe*' as the promise of a reward. If you say *athe athe* and do not pay with food or stroking, '*athe athe*' will begin to mean nothing to the elephant and he will end up not trying any more.

You should space the repetitions as close together as you can, so that he can remember the recent behaviour more easily. Aim to achieve a sequence of at least three good repetitions. You can do more, but three correct or near-correct repetitions in a row can be hard to achieve and so it's a minimum number for effective learning. If a child gives three correct answers in a row, you can be reasonably sure that the child is beginning to learn. The same is true for elephants. The repetitions don't have to be perfect, they just have to be as good as or better than the last ones. Finally, the most efficient way to teach elephants for any behaviour (e.g. sit, lay-down, forward, back) is to do three sets of three repetitions in a row. This means:



- A set of three good (correct or near-correct) repetitions in a row, followed by a short rest of about a minute
- Then three more good repetitions, followed by another short rest
- Then three final good repetitions.

This makes learning fast and you will find that at the beginning of the second set the elephant is already better than the first set, and by the third set, he may even begin with the correct response.

Ensure that your training sessions are not too long on any single day. Sessions should not be more than 20 minutes long with elephants up to five years of age, (and gradually can become longer as the elephant forms habits). Ensure also that there is at least a 20 minute break between sessions. As a maximum you should do only three training sessions per day.

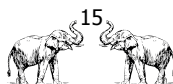
By doing these repetitions close together and by doing three sets, you are teaching him by rote learning – in other words the answer to the problem is still in his conscious mind. Whereas if you allowed big time-gaps between repetitions, the learning will be slower because some of the answers will be forgotten.

## **Consistency**

It's important that the young elephant sees all humans as equal, in that they always ask him to do the same things, the same way. This means that everyone who works with an elephant needs to use the same words, signals and rewards. Otherwise, the elephant will become confused and might form undesirable habits.

## **Overshadowing**

Overshadowing refers to the elephant's inability to do two things at once. It means that you should be careful not to ask for more than one thing at a time. However, this learning principle also gives us a useful technique whereby the elephant's attention can be directed away from an undesirable behaviour and toward an alternative response. If the elephant tries to shake a mahout off his back, stepping the elephant one or two steps back cancels his intention

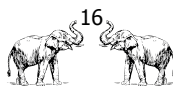


to shake. For any aggressive behaviour, stepping the elephant backward either when ridden or in-hand quells these behaviours far more effectively than punishment and has none of the associated anxiousness or potential for future revenge. For it to be effective, it is essential that step-backs are routinely tested and trained. In early ridden training, it's a good idea to step the elephant back one step before you ride him forward, just to prevent any intention to shake. When things go wrong, such as during the early mounting of the elephant, his desire to shake may be so strong that he doesn't notice the command for step-back, so you have to escalate the pressure to ensure that the elephant responds to the step-back command rather than the motivation to shake. If you are effective in this, the shaking will not occur in the future.











Overshadowing with step-back responses is effective for quelling other motivations. For example if the elephant is afraid of the veterinarian or the injection syringe, step-backs can be used while keeping the syringe at the same distance from the elephant until the step-backs occur from very light pressures. When step-backs occur from very light pressures, the syringe or veterinarian can come a little closer and these step-backs are repeated until the elephant again steps back easily from a light signal. In a short space of time you will have desensitised the elephant to that fearful stimulus. Rewarding with the sequence of *'athe athe'*/head-stroking/food at each stage of calmness enhances this learning.

## **The Nervous Young Elephant**

If the young elephant has a nervous disposition and is shy of human contact, this is an ideal time to train using *'athe athe'* food rewards. Each time he makes contact with you, even if it is with his trunk, say the word *'athe athe'* as soon as he makes contact and then immediately reward with food. Repeat this until you can actually touch the elephant, upon which you should say *'athe athe'* followed by head-stroking and food. As soon as the young elephant becomes confident enough for you to touch him and reward him, cease rewarding him for touching you with this trunk so that it does not develop into an unwanted habit. Instead, now each time you touch the young elephant you should reward him with food and stroking his body, so that he comes to value the contact.



## Take Home Message

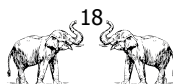
-  Only one person to give a signal at any time. Everybody else should be away from the elephant unless they have a job to do, such as giving food rewards.
-  Start with light pressures, then increase pressure, releasing at the correct response.
-  Ensure '*athe athe*' is said at the moment of the correct response.
-  '*Athe athe*' must be followed by food in the early training, later it is paired with head-stroking.
-  Be consistent with the use of signals (i.e. same voice, same place, same way).
-  Add new signals before the 'known' ones.
-  Train three sets of three improved consecutive repetitions in a session to develop habits.
-  Break training goals down to smallest parts, then train them one by one.
-  Make sure everyone who handles the elephant does things the same way.
-  Do not allow the elephant to move you.

### **3. Training the Baby Elephant**

It is important to know that from the time of birth, elephants start learning and it is the trainer's job to ensure they learn the right things, not the wrong things. They are not born knowing what we want, no animal is ever born this way. Like children, we have to teach them what we want them to do. So the big challenge is how we can get the elephant to learn these things. All behaviours involve reward in some way. Reward can be giving the elephant what he wants after doing something or it can be by making him comfortable when he is not.

In the past, it was believed that punishment would help the elephant to learn. Punishment is common in animal training because it is one of the first things that comes to some people's minds, to teach the animal a lesson. But actually we are punishing the elephant for our own incorrect training. The worst thing, however, is that punishment makes animals anxious and anxiety makes learning slow. If you're scared of your teacher, you will be paralysed with fear and not confident to give the right answer. Fear ruins the relationship between the teacher and the pupil or, in this case, between the mahout and the elephant. When people or animals have had such negative experiences, especially if they involve extreme fear or pain that they had no control over, then bad things can happen later on in life. It is well known that elephants have killed their mahouts and the reasons for this are connected to early use of punishment for which the elephant had no control and could not predict. The important point is, if we want to make a safe, brave elephant that has a strong bond with his mahout, then we should use the techniques of modern training that are well established.

When you teach animals or people, you try to keep the rules the same for all of the animal's life. So we should start establishing the right behaviours as soon as we can. Of course, like a small child, there is a limit to how much a young elephant can learn. So we begin with simple things like moving a couple of steps forward and backward. Importantly, what we teach should last the elephant's whole life. When animals learn things, over and over again, they form habits and can soon respond without thinking. We humans also develop thousands of habits that we take for granted. Anything you do that you don't have to think about anymore is a habit.



Our job is to set up the right habits in the elephant from the start. We do this by doing the same thing the same way each time, and rewarding with a word '*athe athe*' followed by head-stroking/food. If the elephant is too young to take food, reward with just stroking. When the young elephant is ready to take food from humans, he soon associates the voice praise '*athe athe*' with the head-stroking and food. The food should be delivered directly into the elephant's mouth by a person on the ground, not into his trunk or else he will use his trunk when he sees you to not only body-search you for food, but also to later displace you. However later on, when we begin riding the elephant, the food rewards will be delivered directly to the elephant's trunk by the mahout astride.



**Fig. 5: Stroke the bulb of the head as a special reward site in conjunction with the word '*athe athe*' and the delivery of food.**



One of the most important things we train the young elephant to do is to move his legs in the direction we want. Most of what we think of as “naughtiness” is simply a lack of control over the elephant’s legs.

It is useful to begin an elephant’s training soon after he is born. As it is important not to disturb the mother-calf relationship, training sessions should be brief but, even so, these early lessons can establish correct habits. For example, if the young elephant is in the wrong place, we can begin teaching him to move either backward or forward whichever is needed at the time. This is better than punishing him for being in the wrong place because he doesn’t know what is right or wrong and it is too complicated for him. Even if the elephant never gets in the way, we can still take any opportunity to simply teach him to move forward or backward, one or two steps. In this way we will teach the elephant the voice commands for moving his legs forward or backward, just a step or two.

At this age, the training sessions will be very short and simple and perhaps only occasional or momentary. By the time the elephant is ready to begin his ridden training, he should know the commands for stepping forward and backward, to sit and lay-down and even to pick up and give things with his trunk. The more trained responses that are established during the elephant’s early days, the less there is to do later and the less resistance that occurs in later training when he is ridden. If he knows no other way of life other than a positive way of interacting with humans, he will expect no problems. You will have a safer, more confident elephant.



## Phase 1

### Introduction to Training Backward and Forward

Whatever behaviour you are training, always begin with the appropriate voice command and make sure it's said clearly and the same way each time. Training the elephant to step backward is of great importance because it not only teaches him to go in reverse, but it also trains him to stop at the same time (it uses the same muscles as for stop). Probably, the most important thing about training step-back in a young elephant is that it can be used to overshadow aggressive or incorrect behaviours.

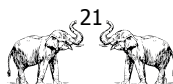
Training forward and backward steps is an important part of the overall scheme of training the elephant to be ridden, even though the ridden work does not occur until the elephant is older. In all there are six phases of training to the point of being independently ridden. Teaching a single step of forward and backward is the beginning of what we call Phase 1.

Here is a reminder of the training steps:

<b>Voice Command</b> ⇨ <b>Light Pressure</b> ⇨ <b>Increase Pressure</b> ⇨ <b>Release Pressure</b> ⇨ <b>Praise and Stroking</b> ⇨ <b>Food</b>
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It is best to teach the elephant to take a single backward step first before forward is trained. Of course, when the elephant gives a single step-back of the forelegs, he is likely to give a second step simply to rebalance himself and this is normal and no problem. However, the important thing to remember is that you should not try to train too many steps backward or forward at any one time. This is because forward can result in a running-away reaction. Teaching reverse also trains the elephant to stop because the step-back muscles are also used for stopping.

**Reverse and Stop:** To train backwards steps, use the voice command '*isettiyaane*' (*isetti-aane*), then press directly with your fingers into the elephant where his shoulder joins his chest at the front until he steps back just one or two steps of his forelegs, and then remove your hand completely i.e. take it away from the elephant. (If the elephant is older and your hand won't move him, use a stick instead. You can try vibrating or tapping instead








of pushing with the stick as some elephants respond better to that). As soon as your hand or the stick is removed say the word '*athe athe*' and then follow with head-stroking/food, or if too young, stroke his body for a few seconds. Do not pat him as they don't learn from patting. When one step of backwards is achieved from a voice command and a light touch, repeat this until the behaviour is well established. If the elephant walks toward you and you want him to stop, your light pressure for step-back will now be effective to stop him. Just before your pressure occurs, ensure that you use the voice command for stop '*nillaane*' (*nillu-aane*). Reward the uptake of the voice and pressure using '*athe athe*'/head-stroking/food.



**Fig. 6: Tapping the leg motivates him to move it in the direction away from the tapping and ceasing tapping trains the response. Tapping then becomes an increasingly light signal. This signal can fortify voice or touch commands, provided these precede the tapping signal.**

**Forward:** Also teach the baby elephant to go forward a single step or two. Again you should use the voice command first '*nadayaane*' (*nada-aane*), and then use your fingers half-way down the elephant's hind legs (or use a stick on the back of the hind leg if your hand doesn't work). Begin with very light pressure and then increase it until the elephant moves forward. As soon as the elephant moves forward just one step at first, immediately release the pressure and take your hand away from the elephant. At that moment say '*athe athe*' and reward him with head-stroking/food. It isn't usually necessary to train the baby elephant to do more than a step or two forwards and backwards. Teaching him this while he is very young, however, makes later training easier.

### Take Home Message

-  Train the baby elephant from the start to move forward and backward from signals. This way, if you need to move him, he will not need any punishment.
-  Always be careful not to remove the pressure until you get the result you are seeking. Removing the pressure teaches the behaviour that came before it.
-  Do not allow anyone to punish the elephant for wrong movement. If done the elephant will remember this and this could result in problems during later training.
-  Remember good timing of signals, pressures and reward makes a happy elephant and bad timing makes a rogue.
-  When things go wrong, blame your training and think about how to repair it.

## 4. Training the 2-3 Year-Old Elephant

For the first two years, the baby elephant's training need not be very structured and each session will also be very short. However, at two years of age, training can become a bit more structured and teaching sessions can be a bit longer. We can make the elephant's learning much faster if we structure it in ways that let him know he's done the right thing, that make him want to repeat the right thing, and that make him recall more easily what the right answer is.

It is very important at this stage to train and consolidate limited steps of forward and backward responses from light touch and voice commands. These responses will be of increasing importance as the elephant progresses in his training and learns to accept a mahout riding him. Do not attempt any further training until these responses are reliably established.

### Phase 2

In this phase, through the assistant's signal we train multiple steps like forward, reverse and stop. You may notice that from here on, the elephant is trained to learn the forward command before the stop command.

**Forward:** When the baby elephant can do one or two steps forward from a voice command and light pressure, then gradually begin training an increasing number of steps. Consolidate each stage through rewards so that he goes forward in many steps from voice/light pressure.

It is important to state at this point that although the elephant may go very well from voice, it is imperative that he also goes from light pressure of the fingers or stick so that the learning of this pressure translates to his later work when ridden. This ensures that in all circumstances the elephant has a well-practiced and safe stop response.

**Reverse and Stop:** When one or two steps of step-back are consolidated, ask progressively for a second or third step with slightly increased pressure if initially there is no response. Take your time and do not ask for more than two improvements in any one session. When these steps are consolidated



and easily achieved by the young elephant ask for more steps, rewarding with `athe athe`/head-stroking/food each time. Repeat these exercises so that the elephant is not only reliable but can respond in different circumstances i.e. in different places.

Also begin now to train the elephant to stop while he is moving forward. This means you have to try to set him up to move through your training of go forward and then after some steps, stop, ensuring you use the relevant voice command `nillaane` (*nillu-aane*) followed by the rewards for `athe athe`/head-stroking/food.

### **Training to Stay**

Training the young elephant to stay in one place is important and it creates a deeper level of communication in that it clarifies stop and go signals. For example, training the elephant to stay basically means that in the absence of commands to move, the elephant should not move. This clarifies the



**Fig. 7: Stand beside the elephant's head, facing his hindquarters to begin the training of stay.**

commands for going forward or reverse because the elephant is not moving randomly forward or backward in between times.

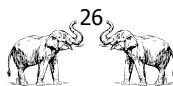
Training the elephant to stay immobile can be done after the elephant has learned to step forward and backward from voice and light pressure signals. Standing on the elephant's left side and beside the elephant's head facing his hindquarters, say the word for stay '*adangi nillaane*' (*adangi nillu-aane*) and then step one step backward from the elephant. If he follows you, step him back one step by pressing or tapping his shoulder (as you have trained for reverse).

If he moves sideways with his forelegs or hindlegs, step him back also. If he steps backwards, ignore it. This is the basic advice for training 'stay'. Repeat this until he does not attempt to move any more.

Repeat this while you stand on the right side of the elephant's head using the same protocol as with the left side and giving the voice command for stay '*adangi nillaane*' (*adangi nillu-aane*) first. Then repeat the same again only this time facing forward and do it also on both sides, correcting the elephant with a step-back if he moves forward or sideways. When this is trained, try walking in a curved line away from the elephants shoulders around his head and to the other shoulder, so see if walking a curved line induces him to move and if it doesn't then correct him with a step-back. Eventually, you can even try running away a few steps to see if your faster movements induce him to move.

When he has learned to stay in one place, practice this frequently so that he stays for longer periods. It is a good idea to train him to stay immobile for a few seconds before giving him his meals.

Before you begin training the young elephant to be ridden, it is important to ensure that he is well established in forward and backward steps from voice and light pressure commands. Being able to step back on command is vital because you can use step-backs to quell any shaking or moving that the elephant does when you mount him. Stepping the elephant back overshadows the unwanted behaviours and stops them getting worse. However, if the elephant steps back of his own accord or even a few steps that you didn't ask for, just ignore it, nothing detrimental will be learned.



## Training to Lift Legs

Training the elephant to lift each of his legs is easy and assists in mounting. The lowest portion behind the elephant's forefoot is sensitive and so when touched or tapped by a stick, the elephant is generally inclined to lift his foot off the ground. As soon as the elephant moves his foot even a very small amount off the ground, the stick should cease contact and 'athe athe' head-stroking/food is used to add to the reward. Once this reaction has been achieved, the voice command is now introduced 'pokkane' (pokku-aane) just before the stick signal. The site where the stick touches the elephant's leg can also be moved a little further up the leg to just under the knee. This process is repeated over a period of days and the aim is to get the foot to raise so that the upper foreleg is horizontal or near horizontal. Remember that it is the stopping of the stick pressure that initially rewards the foot raising, so you must remove the stick pressure as soon as the desired result occurs. It is also important to remember to make gradual height improvements in foot-raising and that you do not expect too much at one time.



**Figs. 8 & 9: Training the elephant to lift his legs is useful not only for foot care but also for mounting.**



The next step in the process is to teach the elephant to hold the foot up by himself. So when the foot is raised, the trainer is careful to notice when the foot lowers even a small amount, at which time the voice command is repeated and the stick is used again to maintain the foot. Longer and longer periods of foot holding are rewarded. For example the elephant holds his foot up for one second, and is then rewarded. Then soon he is rewarded when his foot is held for two seconds, then four seconds etc. Therefore over time, you reward (by stick removal, voice praise, stroking and food) for more extended periods of time where the foot is held by the elephant from a voice command. You should expect that improvements in duration may be slow. Remember to always use the voice on its own first, then the stick if there is no response, and reward continuously until the elephant has learned to hold his foot from a voice command only. If the elephant begins to fail, go back to the reward system.

### **Desensitising to Light Weight on Shoulders**

At this stage it is important to desensitise the elephant to a person leaning on his shoulders so that he becomes comfortable and learns not to react to



**Fig. 10: Lean down on the elephant's shoulders to begin training him to be eventually mounted.**

this pressure. You first begin by pressing down on his shoulders with your hands for just a short period and gradually make the pressing time longer and with more weight. Do not subject him to any prolonged periods of more than 20 seconds of pressing your weight on him. Remember that if he moves and it causes you to stop leaning on him, you will be teaching him that when he moves, he can dislodge you and that is not a good start. Try to set up the situation so that when you lean on him and even if he does move, try to stop him (or get an assistant to control his stop and go reactions, which are now learned). You could also wait until he stops his feet and then remove the leaning pressure. As time goes on you can extend the time you spend leaning on him and begin laying across him, and eventually sitting up for short periods. During any of these times, if the elephant moves try not to get off until he is still. If this is difficult, then ask an assistant to make the elephant stepback (one or two steps only).

## **Training to Sit and Lay Down**

The age of two years is a very good time to begin teaching the elephant to sit and lay down. The easiest way to train this is to begin when the elephant is young and say the voice command just when you think the elephant may lay down (such as in the water). For this to work you must be consistent and say the word every time. Another method is to squeeze and vibrate the young elephant's loose skin behind the elbow of his foreleg or at the point of his shoulder to motivate a 'cringing' effect, so that the elephant lowers his body a very small amount. You may also find that pressure on the top of his shoulders or vibrating the skin at the back of his hindleg can also induce the lowering and eventually the sitting reaction. As soon as he lowers, you should release the pressure, the timing of your release is absolutely critical to the success of this exercise. You have to release the moment the elephant lowers his shoulders and not a second later. At this moment you should also reward with *'athe athe'*/stroking/food. When you have done the first repetition, now add the voice command *iriyaane (iri-aane)* before you squeeze and/or vibrate his skin. Remember that because the elephant has very thick and quite loose skin, you have to vibrate the skin quite vigorously or you may have to use a stick there to tickle him to make him go lower. Before the elephant lowers however, you may find that he first of all bends his body around your hand or the stick, this is not a problem. If you continue and always remember to



release the pressure as soon as the right response occurs, he will lower more quickly and further over time. Whatever methods you use, always remember that the pressure makes the reaction happen and the release of the pressure teaches the elephant. Now, as soon as you get a good reaction, say 'athe athe' and pay with head-stroking/food. When he finally lowers enough that he is able to sit, reward this reaction for longer and longer periods of sitting i.e. 'athe athe'/head-stroking/food after longer periods of time. When he is about to get up, say the word 'elamaane' (elam-aane) for getting up.

Extend this sit-down training to lay down by tugging and vibrating the skin behind the elbow until he lowers his chest toward the ground, little by little releasing the pressure and rewarding with 'athe athe'/head-stroking/food each time he lowers a little more, until he lays on his chest. When the training has



**Fig. 11: To begin the training of sit/laydown, you can motivate the elephant to gradually lower his body by tugging the skin or his foreleg and then rewarding each improved stage of lowering.**








progressed to this point always begin from now on with a voice command '*kidayaane*' (*kida-aane*) for this response. Next, you should also teach the elephant to lay on his side by pushing with the stick higher up the elephant's shoulder until he eventually lays flat. Remember to reward each and every small improvement in reaching these goals: i.e. don't expect a full-blown response. However, if the elephant does chance upon the goal quite suddenly then of course reward this. Remember too, as I mentioned earlier, that if you see the elephant about to sit or lay down at any time, then use the appropriate voice command and reward him. This makes it quicker for him to learn the appropriate voice commands.



**Figs. 12 & 13: Train the elephant to lay down on his chest as well as on his side.**

As mentioned earlier, do not give food to the elephant via the trunk. If you do, you will experience problems in the use of food for learning. Always give food directly into the mouth so that the elephant raises his trunk and keeps it out of the way.

### Take Home Message

-  Remember the importance of this early training so that it makes later training easier.
-  Use every opportunity to use a voice command when the elephant is doing something that you might want him to do from a voice command in the future.
-  Ensure that your timing of removal of pressure and 'reward by food' is perfect i.e. as soon as the elephant gives the first sign of the correct response.
-  Ensure that each part of your reward is separated by a short space of time- first the voice command, then after the correct response say '*athe athe*' followed by head-stroking and food.
-  Blame yourself, not the elephant, if things are not working out.
-  Never punish the animal if it gives the wrong response or no response. You have to re-examine what you did and then set the reaction up carefully and try again.
-  Do not overwork the elephant – 20 minutes in a day is long enough to teach him.

## 5. Training the 3-5 Year-Old Elephant

In some parts of Asia, it is considered that three years of age is an ideal age to begin training the elephant to be ridden. In other parts, it is traditional to wait until the elephant has attained a certain height, which may not be until he is four or five years of age. Remember, that younger the elephant, the less time his shoulders can sustain a mahout on his back. Yet, it is also true that younger the elephant, the easier it is to teach them to be ridden. Older elephants can resist much more strongly and violently and are less mentally pliable than younger elephants, as they have had more years of freedom. The early foundation training is the time of the elephant's life where good riding habits are made. So before the ridden training begins, if the elephant can show forward and backward steps, if he sits and maybe lays down on either his chest or his side and he can pick some things up with this trunk, you will find that the rest of the training is much, much easier.

This is the time when you reinforce the young elephant's training of all the things he has previously learned plus you get him used to having a mahout on his back. Training the elephant to be ridden is not a difficult procedure. You need at least one assistant and preferably two extra people. As mentioned earlier, you only need to train him for 20 minutes per day and you will be riding the elephant freely within 10 days.

Let us assume that the young elephant has learned to go forward and to stop and reverse at this stage. So to now train the ridden work, we will assume that Phases 1 and 2 are complete (if not then thoroughly train Phase 1). So we begin at Phase 3.

### Phase 3

**Habituation of Elephant to Mahout:** If you have been following this manual, the young elephant may have already experienced a mahout pressing down on his shoulders, laying over his back or even being sat on astride in the river or some other place. Unless the elephant is well consolidated in having a human on his back, it is important to go through this stage thoroughly. The neck rope should also be introduced at this stage. This should not present a problem – the rope is just worn snugly around the elephant's neck.



Training the elephant to make positive associations with a human on his back is essential and as mentioned earlier, it can also be achieved in various convenient settings, for example while the elephant is bathing in the river. It is important to recall the overshadowing technique because the biggest challenge to the mahout is aggression that causes the elephant to shake the mahout from his back. This can be eliminated by overshadowing the shaking with step-backs at the very instant the elephant shows the first signs of shaking. The important thing is to increase the pressure for step-back to ensure it occurs when the elephant is about to shake. This becomes easier to do as time goes on. When the motivation to shake may be stronger than the motivation to step-back, you have to be ready to step-back with increased pressure to ensure it is effective.

There are eight stages in this process and each should finish with the mahout dismounting when the elephant is still. Remember that in the early stages of mounting, dismounting is the reward for the elephant. It is best to get off only when the elephant is still, so that you reward stillness. If the elephant moves forward or sideways without being signalled to do so, he should immediately be overshadowed with a step-back. However, if the elephant steps backward on its own, it can be ignored as it usually doesn't lead to any problems and soon disappears. If however, the elephant does continue to go back too many steps (more than five or six), then the assistant should step him forward.

When the mahout achieves each stage, and is pressing-down/laying-over or sitting up, the mahout should say '*athe athe*' and the assistant at the front of the elephant should deliver the head-stroking/food. There should be at least three sets of three consecutive repetitions in a row for each of these stages and try not to do more than three stages per session, so as not to overload the elephant:

1. The mahout presses down on the top of the elephant's shoulders.
2. The mahout makes small jumps up and down beside the elephant while pressing.
3. The mahout jumps up, lays over and is held there by the assistant who holds the mahout's leg.
4. The mahout jumps up and lays his body over the elephant's body.



5. The mahout jumps up, lays over and brings his knee over the elephant's back .
6. The mahout jumps up and brings his entire leg over the elephant's back.
7. The mahout jumps up and crouches over.
8. The mahout jumps up and sits up.

**Consolidate and reward with 'athe athe'/head-stroking/food) each stage until the elephant is calm being mounted.**

**Reward Transfer from Assistant to Mahout:** When the elephant is mounted, you can transfer food delivery from the mouth to the trunk, via the mahout riding the elephant. The mahout astride should now be the one to say



**Figs. 14 & 15: The easiest way to train the elephant to being mounted is to gradually move all over him during bathing. If this is not possible, then it is important to gradually mount the elephant in stages, rewarding and consolidating each stage.**

the voice praise 'athe athe', to stroke and to deliver the food directly to the elephant's trunk rather than to his mouth, as before. To do this, the mahout should stretch his hand with the food very far forward so that the elephant can see that the food is coming from above rather than from below. It may



take some practice for the elephant to manage his trunk above his head in a stable way, so patience is need to teach him to do this. If the elephant does not remember to take food from the mahout above, then the mahout should reach to the side where the elephant can see the food.

When food is readily received by the elephant's trunk from the mahout astride, then mahout now takes over all of the reward process.

Later on in the elephant's training we begin to restrict the food reward, so that when the mahout issues the word '*athe athe*' the only reward that comes is head-stroking, which will have a powerful meaning in itself for two reasons:

1. Head-stroking is rewarding because it strengthens the attachment bond between mahout and elephant.
2. Head-stroking has been consistently paired with the powerful reward of food and so its value is increased.

The young elephant is now ready to be trained to move with a mahout astride. The next phases are about slowly introducing the mahout's control. First however, the elephant needs to learn to be calm, moving with the mahout on his back staying passive and giving no signals.



**Fig. 16:** Once the mahout has mounted the elephant, food can now be given via the trunk.

## Phase 4

**Exclusive Control by the Assistant (with the mahout astride):** Now, with the mahout sitting passively astride, it is time for the assistant to give forward and stop commands to the elephant. It is important that at this stage the mahout does nothing (except deliver rewards) and sits quietly. The elephant has to become accustomed to moving while the mahout sits astride.

The mahout mounts the elephant and the assistant checks and signals or trains forward for many steps (if necessary, and as in Phases 1 – 2) from light pressures and voice commands and a few steps of reverse from light pressures and voice commands, as well as tests/trains that the stop signal is effective from light pressures and voice commands. It is essential that the elephant responds as well with the mahout on his back, as he did without the mahout on his back. The reward sequence of *'athe athe'*/head-stroking/food should be employed by the mahout astride for each correct response.

**Consolidate and reward with *'athe athe'*/head-stroking/food each stage until elephant is calm being mounted.**



**Fig. 17: Exclusive control by the assistant where the mahout does nothing (sits passively) and the elephant is completely under the control of the assistant.**

## Phase 5

This is the phase where the mahout now begins to take over control of the elephant's mobility from the assistant.

**Partial Control by the Mahout:** With the mahout astride the elephant, the mahout now shifts forward in his riding position from the middle of the elephant's back to sitting over the elephant's shoulders (normal riding position), with his foot through the neck rope. In this new position the mahout is able to give the normal ridden commands to the elephant using his feet (heels and toes). The assistant stands by, ready to give assistance with signals that the elephant has already learned, if the elephant fails to respond to the mahout's signals. This assistance will be required frequently in the beginning of this phase and then only occasionally as the elephant comes to learn the new signals. The assistant on the ground must be very quick to assist if the elephant does not respond to the mahout's signals on board. However, as time goes on the assistant becomes less involved in giving the elephant signals to the point where he remains discreetly and increasingly at a distance when all of the controls from the mahout are effective. Step-back is trained first as this gives more safety to the mahout (i.e. the mahout has control over the stop response).

To begin, the mahout asks the elephant to step-back using the voice signal '*isettiyaane*' (*isetti-aane*) followed by drawing both heels back into the elephant's shoulders, then immediately after this, the assistant gives the elephant the light pressure from the fingers or the stick to reinforce the command. If the elephant does not respond, the assistant increases the pressure as he would have done if the mahout were passive (Phase 4) or non-existent (Phase 2). This is repeated until the elephant steps back from the mahout's voice and heel pressure. When the elephant responds, the mahout must be quick to soften the pressure of his heels and to reward with sequence of '*athe athe*'/ head-stroking/food.

It is essential that the mahout's signals come before the signals of the assistant and that the mahout does not remove the pressure of his heels on the elephant's shoulders until he feels a step back. If he stops pressing and



the elephant has not stepped back then the wrong response will be trained.

Now it is time to train the elephant to go forward from the equal pressure of the toes of both the mahout's feet. The mahout first gives the voice command for going forward '*nadayaane*' (*nada-aane*) which is immediately followed by the vibrating pressing of the mahout's toes in the elephant's earlobes. As this is the first time the elephant experiences the mahout's toes on his earlobes, it is unlikely that the elephant will move forward, so the assistant must be very quick to assist in helping the elephant to move forward by using the signal the elephant already knows. As soon as the elephant moves forward, the pressure of the mahout's toes should be softened and the elephant should



**Fig. 18: The mahout now begins to train the elephant to respond to signals from his toes for forward and his heels for stop and reverse. The teacher ensures that the signals are consistently given in a precise location.**

be rewarded by '*athe athe*' followed by head-stroking and food. As before, the mahout must increase the pressure until the response occurs upon which the usual rewards are used.

**Consolidate and reward with '*athe athe*'/head-stroking/food each stage until elephant is calm being mounted.**

**Turn:** This is also a good time to train the elephant to turn his forelegs so that he can learn changes of direction. Up until now the elephant has only walked in straight lines, so now he is trained to turn. To do this, the mahout uses his toes in the neck strap behind the lobe of a single ear. The mahout says the command for turn '*valathiyaane/idathiyaane*' (*valathi-aane/ idathi-aane*) and then vibrates his toes on the flesh of one earlobe only. Pressure on the left ear while the elephant is walking forward will cause the elephant to turn his head toward the right and also turn his forelegs to the right. Pressure on the right ear similarly causes the elephant to look left and turn left. If the elephant does not turn or turns the wrong way, the assistant helps by leaning increasing pressure on the earlobe with his fingers. It is vital that the mahout and the assistant remember that the pressure must be released as soon as the first sign of the correct answer (turn) is given, as this is the reward of pressure-release. In addition, the word '*athe athe*' marks the moment of the correct response and is followed by head-stroking and food. When the elephant turns easily, more steps are gradually asked for, always using the voice command first and always rewarding with '*athe athe*'/head-stroking/food, each of which are delivered by the mahout astride the elephant.

In some parts of Asia, the elephant is trained to hold a stick in his trunk at an early age and can be led with this stick by a person. So this helps in training turns. The mahout riding the elephant gives the signals with his voice and toes for turning one way or the other, and then immediately the assistant on the ground leads the elephant in the correct direction, if the elephant himself makes no attempt to follow the mahout's directions. Soon the person on the ground can gradually move further and further away. For each correctly executed turn in the early stages, the elephant should be rewarded by '*athe athe*'/head-stroking/food.

It is very important in the beginning of training turns that the mahout does not ask for more than two steps (of the forelegs) of turn and only gradually



increases the number of turning steps. If one turn is more difficult for the elephant, then that turn is focused upon with more repetitions than the other.

**Picking Up and Giving Objects:** From here on, it is a good time to develop the picking-up of objects with the trunk and giving them to the mahout above. To do this the assistant is required to throw an object (such as a stick) on the ground and then using the voice command for pick-up '*edaane*' (*edu-aane*), just before the elephant touches the object, he is rewarded with '*athe athe*'



**Figs. 19 & 20: Training the elephant to turn can be shaped by gradually diminishing the role and proximity of the assistant.**

head-stroking/food. This is repeated, rewarded and consolidated through each of the following stages:

1. Touching the object.
2. Grasping the object with his trunk but not necessarily raising it.
3. Grasping the object and raising it a small amount.
4. Grasping the object and raising it a little higher.
5. Grasping the object and raising it higher still to within the mahout's easy reach.
6. Grasping the object and releasing it to the mahout.

When the object is to be released to allow the mahout to take it, the voice command for give '*kondu vaa aane*' is used and reward with '*athe athe*'/head-stroking/food follows. This is repeated in each training session from here on with a variety of objects once the stick is mastered.



**Figs. 21, 22, 23: The gradual training of trunk use in the elephant firstly touching, then picking up, then picking up and giving object to the assistant, and finally picking up and releasing the object to the mahout.**

## Phase 6

**Complete Control by the Mahout:** This phase develops smoothly from phase five as the assistant slowly becomes unnecessary and the elephant is completely controlled by the mahout. During this phase, the mahout gradually asks for more steps of forward backward and turn (forelegs), rewarding each time. Again, it is important not to overload the elephant, so restrict training sessions to only 20 minutes, unless you are going on a safari ride to graze etc. If you wish to do more repetitions in one day, then ensure there is at least a 20 minute break between sessions. You should do a maximum of three sessions per day.



**Fig. 24: The mahout is now riding the elephant independently.**

**Turning the Hind Legs Sideways:** There is one more response to be trained for complete control of the elephant's mobility, and this is the turn of the hindlegs. This particular response is useful but not as essential as the other movements. It is much easier to train this movement if the elephant is previously trained to move his hindlegs sideways by a person on the ground, before training it astride. This can be done by tapping the side of the hindleg



until it steps away. With the mahout, the voice signal for stepping the hindlegs must first be given followed by the pressing of just one of the mahout's heels on the elephant's shoulder, which is immediately followed by an assistant signalling the elephant to move his hindlegs sideways. If there is no response, then the assistant uses increased pressure to obtain the response. As soon as the correct response is given, the elephant is rewarded with 'athe athe'/ head-stroking/food. This is repeated until the elephant learns to move his hindlegs sideways in response to the heel pressure of the mahout riding the elephant. If the elephant moves forward instead, the mahout stops him and the sideways of the hind legs is requested again. If the elephant repeatedly moves forward instead of moving sideways, facing him in front of a fence or barrier can make this training easier.

**Faster and Slower:** As the elephant's responses improve and he goes from voice commands and light pressure of toes and heels, it is now an important step to train speed alterations so that his legs can be made faster or slower. The signals for going faster are the same as for going forward and the pressure is increased if there is no reaction. The signals for going slower are the heels against the elephant's shoulders and once again, the pressure is increased if there is no response. As soon as the correct quickening or slowing response is offered, the elephant should be immediately rewarded with 'athe athe'/head-stroking/food. The mahout's pelvis is used to follow and maintain the speed of the elephant so that it acts as a maintenance signal.

**Environmental Challenges:** It is also important now to increase the environmental challenges very gradually. Do not make big alterations in environmental challenges but always make them gradual. Riding out with other elephants is a very good solution and letting experienced elephants take the lead in difficult terrain is also very important. However, it is also important that the young elephant doesn't learn to expect to be led by older elephants. When he has sufficient experience, ensure that the young elephant spends some time leading the others wherever possible.

Training and refining step-back should also be continued and rewarded as time goes on. This can be done in a precise way such as drawing a specific track on the ground that is lined with small rails or stones with a left and right turn that the elephant has to negotiate backwards. If elephants develop phobias of



events or objects in their normal environment (such as local noises or chickens etc), then retraining step-back can help greatly (this is because both the noise and the chicken are triggers for a deeper problem of the loss of responses, especially the stop and step-back responses).



**Fig. 25: Practising more precise step-back responses on a specific track deepens both stop and step-back signals.**

It is important throughout the elephant's life that his good habits are encouraged and maintained. It is necessary to check how obediently the elephant performs all his responses and if there are any losses

of responding then the particular responses should be retrained as described in this manual, focusing on rewarding the correct responses.










**Phase Out Food:** As the elephant learns and becomes more consistent in his responses to voice and the light signals of the mahout's toes and heels, the use of food rewards begins to diminish gradually, and is eventually replaced by head-stroking which is never reduced. Head-stroking creates and maintains bonds of confidence and trust between mahout and elephant and thus should always be maintained.

The elephant will learn new things at his individual rate and he may find some tasks easier than others. Be patient. But above all, be consistent. Consistency is now the most important thing in the elephant's life so that the rules never change and he learns to become confident in the world. This way he is able to meet serious challenges, such as those posed during forest patrolling, conservation missions and noisy festivals, with confidence rather than fear.



**Fig. 26: Training the young elephant using humane methods is the surest way of making him brave in challenging environments. Here the elephant is used in a safe, non-invasive way to monitor wild populations of rhinos.**

## Take Home Message

-  Training can sometimes be frustrating. Remember it is a weakness to resort to violence. The more you train with kindness and using clear signals and plenty of rewards, the braver your elephant will be in the face of danger, and when you most need him to trust you.
-  Do not assume that once the elephant has learned these things that he now knows them for life. You should constantly check his responses and retrain them again using food rewards (even if you have phased it out) in order to keep them perfect.
-  Always keep in mind that elephants can learn human vocal sounds but they do not understand language as we do. So use your voice commands clearly and in the same way each time.
-  Be patient, training has its ups and downs and sometimes things go fast, other times slowly. If the elephant is highly aroused or in an intense emotional state, abandon training for that day.
-  Finally remember that you only have to do a few repetitions so training doesn't have to take long. Keep your sessions to around 20 minutes.
-  Elephants are highly intelligent and sensitive animals. Treat your elephant well.
-  Remember the power of touch. Elephants are social contact animals like humans and that provides the basis that enables us to work with him.
-  When elephants have endured violence that they cannot predict, control or understand they harbour it causing them later on in their lives to turn violent against those who have hurt them.
-  **Always Treat Your Elephant With Respect.**