

# Eager Students Return | Andrews Blog

## Day 2

Now that we had a good insight into the training of the elephants yesterday, we began with some more work on the ground with the three older elephants. At last things were looking really good. Occasionally I had to intervene but mostly the mahouts showed they had learned things the previous day. This workshop was their first introduction to positive reinforcement and I was very impressed how they already saw its potential. Everything today was so much better than yesterday and the elephants were now staying still more or less, and were picking up objects on command. The elephant that didn't like the stick was cajoled into taking it by using a combination of tasty grass wrapped around the stick. I love to see this kind of ingenuity in the mahouts as it shows they are thinking creatively about how to set up the responses they are looking for.



*The next morning the Mahouts arrived in their traditional dress in beautiful colours*



*Happy Mahouts are a good sign*

Now it was time for the two very young elephants to be brought in. Along they came with their mothers and this time they were already different. Both showed far more curiosity than yesterday. We were able to deliver food easily each time into the mouth of the larger of the two, and the younger one gradually lingered for longer and longer so we could also reward him into his mouth. The reason we insist on this on the ground is because rewarding the elephant into the trunk means that the trunk starts sniffing around searching for food on you pockets and everywhere else where rewarding elephants straight into their mouths means that the trunk is kept out of the way when you say the word 'tora!' which is the secondary reinforcer that we use meaning 'here comes food'. The secondary reinforcer marks the moment of the correct behaviour. It's amazing to see how fast they pick up that word. After only a couple of repetitions, they gape their mouths open as soon as they hear the word!

The larger of the two young elephants was doing so well that we decided to teach him to step back and forward using the sequence of voice, finger pressure on his trunk and then food. He got the idea very fast and by the end of the day could go back better than the older ones simply from voice alone. The younger of the two young elephants was also gaining confidence and was now accepting food into its mouth when it heard the word tora! We finished the day feeling that we had achieved some good teaching because of the progress of the elephants and the enthusiasm of the mahouts plus the way they thought creatively on how to achieve responses without punishment. I'm sure that this kind of engagement will and acceptance will lead to better welfare as well as reducing deaths of mahouts because the early torturous breaking-in can be eliminated.

