



Siddhartha and the Swan

Long ago in far-away India, near the great Himalayan mountains, there lived King Sudhodana and his wife, Queen Maya. One day, the Queen gave birth to a baby boy, their first child. They called the baby Siddhartha.

Naturally, the King and Queen wanted their family and friends to see their new baby so, at their invitation, people came from far and wide. Among the visitors was a wise old fortune-teller who had come down from his home in the mountains.

“Tell me,” said the king, “what future do you see for my son?”

“Well, your majesty,” replied the old man, “your son could become a great king one day...”

“I knew it!” exclaimed the king excitedly.

“He will rule the kingdom after me.”

“On the other hand,” continued the old man, “he may choose to leave the palace

and lead a simple life, devoting himself to helping others instead.”

“He’ll do no such thing!” retorted the king. “He’s going to be a king, like me!”

So the young prince Siddhartha grew up surrounded by luxury. The King watched over him and made sure that he had the best of everything. He was proud of his son and wanted him to be happy and enjoy the royal life.

One day, when the prince was seven years old, his father sent for him.

“Siddhartha,” he said, “when you grow up you will be king and rule our kingdom. It is now time for you to begin your training.”

And so Siddhartha began his education. He was taught how to ride a horse, how to shoot an arrow; how to wrestle and use a sword: all the skills that a warrior king would need.

Siddhartha learned his lessons well, as did his cousin, Devadatta. The two boys were

about the same age and the king thought that they would be good company for one another. Every day, when his lessons were over, Prince Siddhartha would go and play in the palace grounds where all sorts of animals lived. He particularly liked to walk near the lake in the evening. Every year since he was a baby, a pair of beautiful white swans had nested there and he liked to sit and watch them.

Then, one evening, he saw three more beautiful wild swans flying overhead. Suddenly, as he watched, one of the swans faltered and fell to the ground.

“Oh no!” cried Siddhartha. “What can have happened?”

So as not to frighten it any more, Siddhartha went very quietly up to where the swan lay and began to stroke it gently. An arrow was sticking out of its wing.

“Now I understand,” said Siddhartha. “Someone has shot you.”

Taking great care, he removed the arrow and took off his shirt and wrapped it around the swan.

“I’ll look after you until your wing is better,” he said.

Just then, he heard a voice. “Where is it? I know it must be around here somewhere; I saw it fall!”

It was Devadatta, Prince Siddhartha’s cousin, who came running up carrying his bow and arrow.

“Hey, that’s my swan! I shot it. Give it to me,” he demanded.

“You can’t have it,” replied Siddhartha. “It’s a wild swan. It doesn’t belong to you.”

“I shot it so it’s mine; everyone in this kingdom knows that,” said Devadatta, getting angry.

“You’re right, that is the law of our kingdom,” replied Siddhartha, “but this swan isn’t dead. She is injured and I want to help her get well again.” The two boys began to argue.

“Stop,” said Siddhartha. “This isn’t helping. Let’s go and ask the king and his wise ministers to help us settle this.”

When they got to the meeting hall, everyone looked very busy.

“We’ve come to ask you to help us settle a disagreement,” said Siddhartha.

And the ministers listened as Siddhartha and Devadatta told them what had happened.

“...and I shot the swan, so it rightfully belongs to me,” concluded Devadatta.

The ministers nodded their heads. It was indeed the law of the kingdom that an animal or bird belonged to whoever shot it.

“That would be so if it were dead,” argued Siddhartha, “but I saved it. It is wounded but it is still alive.”

Now the ministers shook their heads. They were puzzled. Who did the swan belong to?

“I think I can help,” a voice said. Looking up, they saw an old man standing in the doorway. He approached and looked at the wounded animal in Siddhartha’s arms.

“If this swan could talk,” said the old man, “it would tell us that it wanted to be well again and be free to fly and swim with the other wild swans. None of us wants to feel pain or die and it is the same for the swan. It wants to live, so it should go to whoever wants to give it life.”

“Let it be so,” said the king. “Siddhartha shall keep the swan. Thank you, old man, for your wise advice.”

But the old man had already disappeared, as quietly as he had come.

All this time, Devadatta had stood silent. He remembered how kind his mother had been when he had once fallen and cut his leg badly. She had bandaged the cut and looked after him. He had never before stopped to think that animals had feelings - that they too felt pain and appreciated kindness.

And so the two boys cared for the swan until it was well again and, one evening, when its wing was completely healed, they led it down to the palace lake. Just then, the familiar sound of beating wings could be heard overhead.

“Look,” said Devadatta. “The others have come back for her.”

Soon, the swan rose into the air to join her friends. She circled the lake one last time, as if to say goodbye before flying off towards the mountains in the North.