

KYOTO JOURNAL #65 (2007)

Siddhartha & the Swan

From “Milk from Water: Siddhartha and the Great Bird”

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In the early morning sun, in the spring pavilion, at the edge of the red lotus pool, Siddhartha sat with legs crossed, watching the light play upon the water. In this quiet time after waking, with the webs of sleep still dissolving, he regarded the morning and let it enter his senses. Before the day’s lessons with the acharyas, before his visit to the council hall, before his mind grew busy with the many clamorous thoughts of the day, he would sit quietly and be with the world—though he knew his father disapproved, calling it idleness, calling it the sign of a poetic temperament.

With the breeze still fresh from nighttime, the sounds still crisp in the cool air, Siddhartha sat, the rays of the sun warming him, as he concentrated silently on his breath. He could hear the rustle of leaves, the sound of insects, the distant lowing of a bullock, the tinkle of ankle bells and bangles from women moving about. And today he heard the call of swans, the beating of great wings like a banner slowly flapping in the wind. In his mind’s eye he saw the chevron flight of swans moving before the sun, making wing toward the distant mountains in the north.

And then an anguished sound ripped the air, and the rhythm of

wingbeats scattered into chaos, the cry still echoing. Siddhartha opened his eyes and saw the swan, a great white bird, fall to the ground at the edge of the pool. As it struggled to right itself, gouts of blood sprayed from its wing and side; its vain flapping only drove the arrow deeper, and the swan cried out in pain, a hoarse, soul-wrenching sound.

Siddhartha rose and approached the bird slowly, his hands open. The bird watched him with wide, frightened eyes, shrieking, until Siddhartha's soothing noises calmed it. Gently embracing the swan, holding it upon his lap, Siddhartha snapped the shaft of the arrow and drew its feathered half through the injured wing. When he pulled the other half, with the tip, from the swan's side, the blood flowed copiously and the great bird grew suddenly still, yet its heart was racing, its breath fast and shallow. The swan's wing was cleanly punctured, but the wound in its side was more ragged; it gaped like a bloody mouth forming an O. Siddhartha called out for a servant, but seeing none near, he tore his own dhoti to bind the wounds.

And as he sat with the swan on his lap, calling out again for help, a shadow fell across them. Siddhartha looked up to see his cousin, Devadatta.

"It is my bird," said Devadatta. "I killed it."

"It is still alive, cousin."

"That is my arrow you hold, cousin. And the bird claimed by my arrow is likewise mine."

"Take the arrow, then. That is rightfully yours. But the swan you must leave with me."

"I say it is mine."

"Are you a hunter?"

“As this bird is my witness, cousin.”

“Then let me ask you this. If two hunters should each hit a bird, one arrow injuring the bird, the other killing it, then to whom does the animal belong?”

“To the man who killed it, of course.”

“And to the man who merely caused injury?”

“That man is a poor shot and does not deserve the animal.” At that moment, Devadatta realized he had trapped himself. “But wait, cousin, you did not kill the bird. You mean to save it. Were you to leave it be, it would die and my arrow would be the killing shot. Your example does not apply.”

“What is more important, Devadatta? To give death or to give life? To take life or to maintain life? To injure or to heal?”

“I know the answer and I shall not say it. You aim to trap me further by clever words. I say we take this matter before the brahmins and let their wisdom be the judge.”

Siddhartha opened his palms in agreement, showing no resistance. He lifted the fallen swan and its blood covered him, staining his dhoti deep red.

They made their way past the reflecting pool, past the spring pavilion, where the breeze was tinged with the fragrance of lilies. Devadatta walked proudly, as if he were the hunter returning with his trophy and Siddhartha his manservant. And behind him Siddhartha bore the swan in such a way that he looked regal—not like a king bearing his vanquished foe, but like a royal supplicant bringing sacrifice to the temple.

A crowd was gathered there, waiting to be heard, the men impatient and anxious; some publically aired their disputes over

property, irrigation, taxes. The Raja's judgments were binding, and so there were people pacing about, mumbling or chanting their cases to rehearse them before entering the hall. It was a restless crowd, and noisy, but when Devadatta appeared, followed by the blood-covered Prince carrying the swan, all voices and motion ceased. Silently, the crowd parted to make a path up the stairs to the hall of cedarwood, where the Raja and his advisors made their rulings.

As they moved forward, people pressed close, curious to see, and Devadatta brushed them aside with his bow. At the top of the stairs, at the entrance to the hall, each boy made his case. And then the brahmins spoke:

“What comes first? Life or death? Generation or extinction? And what is more good?”

“Justice is not so easily divisible into two such simple categories! The problem is complex. Let us consider the possible causes and conditions.”

“But we are human in a world full of suffering. Is it better for us to reduce suffering or to create more suffering?”

“And what is more suffering for the bird? To die swiftly or to endure long pain while it heals? And what if the healing fails and it must endure a long and painful death?”

“It is not our lot to decide such things—that is the purview of the gods!”

The brahmins lavished their wisdom on this issue, each quoting from the sacred texts to support his side. The argument continued—in favor of Siddhartha, then in favor of Devadatta. And Devadatta stood at the top of the stair holding his bow and quiver of arrows, waiting, for he was certain he would win and the swan would be his to take.

At the foot of the upper steps Siddhartha sat with the great injured bird, tending to its wounds, stanching the flow of blood. He sent for honey and a poultice—full of healing herbs—to bandage over the wounds. The arrow had pierced the swan’s right wing and its abdomen.

When the drugs and dressing were brought, Siddhartha smoothed aside blood-soaked feathers, cleaned the wounds, and bandaged them. He poured a narcotic mixture into the swan’s throat. He felt its heart slow, its body relax, its breathing calm. And now the great bird lay asleep, and not dead, in his arms. From its matted feathers water trickled crimson and pink trails down the stairs into the courtyard. The air was thick with the cloying, metallic smell of blood.

And as the argument continued in the hall, Devadatta looked down, surveying the gardens from his height as if he were the Raja. He laughed at Siddhartha.

One of the brahmins examined the arrow Siddhartha had pulled from the swan and looked to Devadatta. “It was not your original intention to hunt,” he said, “for the arrow is not a fowling arrow. It is one used to shoot at targets, and that is why it did not kill the swan. Had you used a proper arrow, had you been truly hunting, the swan would be dead, and thus yours. But the palace is not a place for hunting, nor was that your intention. You were merely practicing archery, and on a whim you desired to inflict harm. You are a cruel boy, not a bad hunter. You have accrued bad karma, Devadatta.”

There were murmurs of agreement, but another brahmin said, “True, it is not a fowling arrow, but look at the skill of Devadatta’s shot! He pierced a wing and the torso at once. What excellent timing! What a sharp eye! What quick calculation! I say he is enterprising and

not cruel, for he seized a fleeting opportunity. His intention was, indeed, one of hunting, but he had not the time to change his arrows.” The crowd cheered.

But then an old man appeared in the hall, a skinny rustic with sunburnt shoulders and dirt on his sandals. He pounded his staff on the floor, and the resounding echoes caught the crowd’s attention—voices died to a murmur, then ceased. “We have been talking,” said the old man. “We have been talking and talking, deciding the fate of a mortally injured creature. We have been talking and talking of mercy and generation, death and extinction, the good and the just. And what is right? As we talked—until now—as words flowed from our lips, the life blood flowed from the creature whose fate we debate with such passion. Even had we decided that it was to live, we should have been too late, for it would have been dead. Our talking would have killed it. But there is one here who did not merely speak of its fate. Nor does he speak now. While we were talking, he tended to this swan, this great bird who can separate milk from water. He stopped the blood. He heals while we vainly flap our jaws.”

All eyes turned to Siddhartha, who sat with the sleeping swan in his lap. He looked up at the brahmins and Devadatta standing at the top of the stairs and he squinted up at the sun, which had reached its apex in the clear sky. He saw only silhouettes as the old man pointed down at him; he felt an affinity, as if he should know him. And the sangha agreed with the old man’s wisdom. He had pointed out the hypocrisy in their conduct, and so they decided that death had had its chance— now life should have its way. They gave the swan to Siddhartha.

And Devadatta said, “You have bested me here, cousin. You

have shamed me beyond the degree of my transgression. It is only a bird we speak of. A trivial life, after all.”

“But all life is precious, Devadatta. All life deserves the same respect.”

“I will avenge myself for this, Siddhartha. Someday I shall return this favor. I shall best you and I shall humiliate you. I shall cut you down and reveal to all that you are more suited to be a poet than a prince. Mark my words.”

“The gods hear, Devadatta. And your heart hears.”

“Goodbye, cousin.” And Devadatta stalked away without another word.

When Siddhartha turned to say his thanks, the old man had disappeared. Someone in the crowd below shouted, “A cobra!” and the people scattered like a wheeling flock of birds.

