Stories for Thinking #8 - 'Buddha and the Swan'

(Buddhist Story)

Buddha was born more than 2,500 years ago in northern India. He was a prince, the son of a rich king, and his name was Siddhartha. When he was born, his father sent for wise men and priests to foretell the baby prince's future. One said that he would become a great emperor, another said he would become a holy man that would leave home when he found out about old age, sickness, and death. The king wanted his son to be a great emperor, not a monk or teacher. So he gave orders that the prince should grow up never knowing about old age, illness, or death

When Siddhartha was a boy he was never allowed out of the royal palace, and he never saw people who were old, ill, or unhappy. Even dying flowers were picked from the royal gardens so that he would not see them. All he knew about were his rich family, their servants in the palace, and the animals that lived in the palace grounds. The young prince learned how to read and write, how to ride a horse and how to shoot a bow and arrow. He became very good at these things, so much so that his cousin Devadatta became very jealous of him.

Even when he was young Siddhartha had a compassionate nature. Here is what happened when he found for the first time an animal that was suffering.

One day when Siddhartha was with his cousin in the palace grounds they saw a swan. Devadatta reached for his bow and arrow, took careful aim, and shot the bird.

'Look at that!' said Devadatta. 'Got him the first time!'

The great white bird fell bleeding to the ground. As soon as he saw the swan fall, Siddhartha ran over to it and carefully tended to the arrow. He took some leaves and began to wipe the blood away. He nursed the bird in his arms, stroking its white feathers.

'Take your hands off my swan!' shouted Devadatta. 'You've no right to touch it. It's my swan. I shot it!'

'Yes,' said young Siddhartha. 'But I'm trying to save it.'

'That's not fair,' said Devadatta. 'It's mine, I shot it. You must give it to me. If you don't give it back I'll take you to court.'

'All right.' said the prince. 'We'll let the court decide.'

Devadatta and Siddhartha went before the Judge in the royal courtyard of the palace. Whilst they were waiting Siddhartha refused to be parted from the swan. He kept it with him, nursing it in his arms. Now it was up to the Judge to decide. Who should the swan be given to? To Devadatta who had shot it, or to the prince who had tried to save it?

The Judge looked carefully at the swan and saw that it was recovering from its wound. He then gave his judgment. As the swan was alive, due to the care of the prince, he should be allowed to keep it. Otherwise it would have died, and then Devadatta who had shot it could have claimed it.

After some time the swan recovered completely and the prince set it free again. All his life Siddhartha cared for animals. He would never kill living beings, and he told his followers tbat they should kill no living things. This was the Buddha's first teaching.