

Lesson 3 – ARGUMENTS – Devadatta and the Swan

Prince Siddhartha was extremely kind and compassionate to all. He never hurt others, and he always wanted to make others happy, including all the servants and other people who worked for him and his family. He was always ready to help both human and animal beings. He even loved snakes and other animals that other people didn't care about.

He often played in the park with his friends and his cousin, Devadatta. One day, Prince Siddhartha was walking in the woods with Devadatta, who had brought his bow and arrows with him. Devadatta saw a swan flying and immediately he put an arrow in his bow and shot at it. The boys saw the swan drop from the sky.

Both boys ran toward the swan. Prince Siddhartha could run very fast and found the swan first. He was surprised and glad to see that it was still alive! But it was injured and in great pain. He very gently removed the arrow from the swan's wing, caressing the swan tenderly. He looked around and quickly found some leaves that he knew were good for healing wounds. He squeezed out some juice from the leaves onto the wound, to stop the bleeding.

Just then Devadatta rushed up to Siddhartha and angrily demanded,

“Give me my bird! I shot it.”

Prince Siddhartha replied, “No, I'm not going to give it to you. If you had killed it, then it would be yours. But it was wounded and alive, and I saved it, so it's mine.”

Devadatta shouted, “You stole my bird! It's mine! Give it to me!”

His face looked full of rage. He was very angry that Siddhartha was keeping the swan away from him. He was proud to be a hunter, killing animals with his bow and arrows. In his mind, his cousin was stealing the bird that he expertly shot.

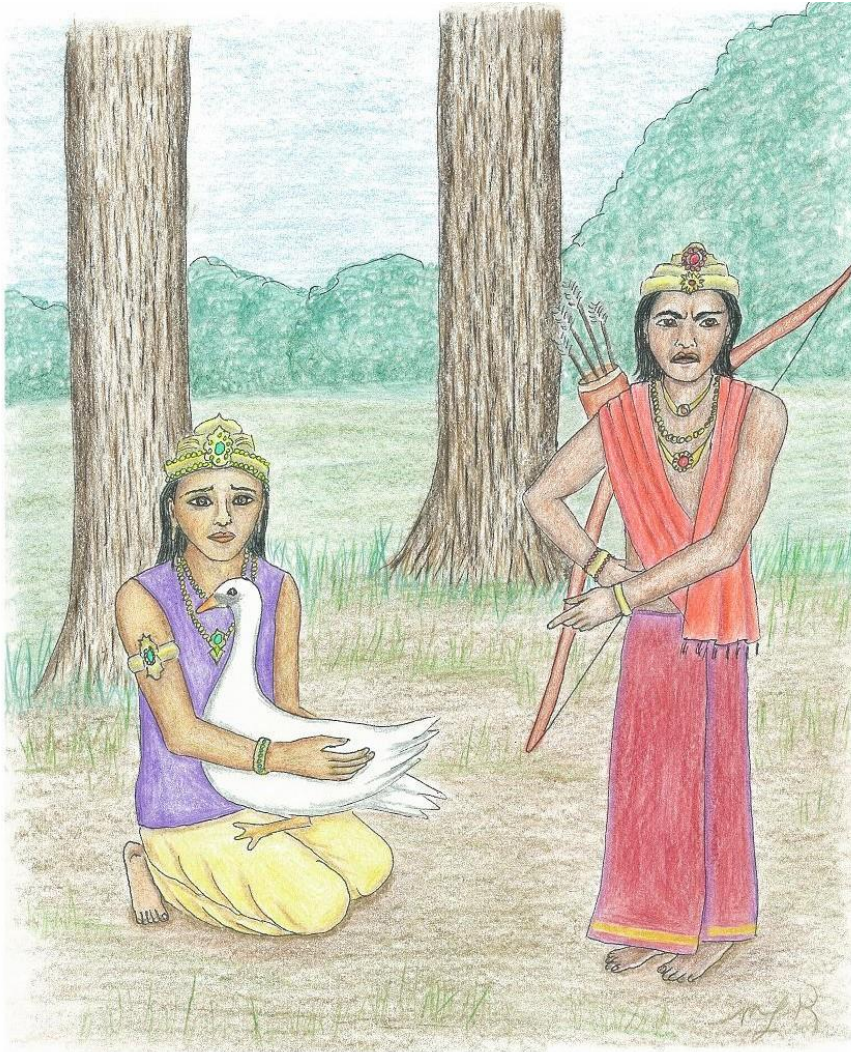
Prince Siddhartha would never let an animal suffer or allow it to be killed. His compassion for the swan was powerful, and he was determined to protect it no matter what.

Devadatta wanted to grab the bird, insisting repeatedly, “Let go! Let go of the bird!”

Prince Siddhartha couldn't bear the thought of giving the bird to his cousin, who would not save its life but would surely let it die. He shielded the swan with his body, cuddling it to his chest so Devadatta couldn't get it. The prince knew how stubborn, uncaring and angry Devadatta was - he would argue, shout and fight until he got his way, insisting he was correct and others were wrong. So, Prince Siddhartha said,

“Let’s go to the scholars and ask who really owns it.”

The scholars were wise men who had studied for many years and who advised his father, King Suddhōdana, on many occasions. They knew social and spiritual laws and rules and often made determinations of fairness to help solve disputes in the kingdom.



Devadatta agreed, confident that the scholars would agree with him that a wild animal belongs to the person who shoots it. He knew that all hunters everywhere live by that rule, so how could anyone disagree?

They went to the scholars and each boy explained what happened and his point of view of the situation. The scholars discussed it and said,

“A life must belong to him who tries to save it. A life cannot

belong to one trying to destroy it. So, the swan belongs to Prince Siddhartha.”

Devadatta was stunned and furious. He began to hate his cousin.

Prince Siddhartha took care of the swan until it was healed. Then he released it so it could live in freedom as a wild swan.

“The bird is now free, and doesn’t belong to anyone,” he thought, as the bird flew high into the air.

Questions:

1. How was Devadatta related to Prince Siddhartha? (Prince Siddhartha's cousin)
2. What did Devadatta want to do when he saw the swan? (shoot it and kill it)
3. How did Devadatta feel when Prince Siddhartha wouldn't let him have the swan? (angry)
4. How would Devadatta behave in an argument? (He was very stubborn, uncaring and angry, and would argue, shout and fight until he got his way)
5. How did Prince Siddhartha and Devadatta settle the argument? (they went to the scholars)
6. What was the scholars' reason for saying the swan belongs to Prince Siddhartha? (the swan was alive and a life belongs to one who saves it, not to one who tries to destroy it)

What the Buddha said:

“Na tena ariyo hoti, yena pāṇāni himsati; ahimsa sabbapāṇānam, ariyō ti pavuccati.”

“He is not noble who injures living beings. He is called noble because he is harmless to all living beings.”

Dhammapada 270 (19:15)

Dharma discussion – Arguments:

Prince Siddhartha and his cousin Devadatta had a disagreement over the swan. So they argued, like we all often do when we have a disagreement. But they had a different style of arguing. How did Devadatta argue? Devadatta just insisted on having his way, saying “it's mine,” “give it to me,” and “let go.”

His only reasoning was “I shot it,” and he accused Prince Siddhartha of stealing from him.

And he used anger and shouting to try to overpower Prince Siddhartha. Devadatta used words showing only selfish interest, thinking only of himself: “it's mine,” “give it to me.”

Often, a person who argues like that doesn't have a good reason for arguing – he just wants something for himself.

How did Prince Siddhartha argue?

He explained his point of view clearly, he tried to persuade Devadatta why he thought he was correct, and he was firm in his position.

This is a better, more mature style of arguing.

He didn't just shout back, "no, it's mine!"

What do you think might have happened if he only shouted back at Devadatta? Devadatta would have shouted louder, would have been even more forceful and angry, and maybe would have tried to grab the swan out of his cousin's hands. It probably would have led to violence and more anger.

Why? Because of Devadatta's character. How would you describe his character, his personality? Angry, uncaring, stubborn, impatient, demanding. Devadatta didn't listen; he didn't patiently argue his point of view. Prince Siddhartha knew it was no use continuing to argue; he needed to get help from adults to resolve the dispute and save the swan.

We have all experienced this - when the person arguing with us is very angry and won't listen or reason with us, we might need to ask an adult to help.

But should we argue over every disagreement? Should we ask an adult to help us resolve every argument we can't resolve ourselves?

No. Sometimes, it's just not that important.

For example, what if Prince Siddhartha and his cousin were arguing over a pen, do you think Prince Siddhartha would seek help from the scholars to resolve the disagreement?

He probably would have thought it's too unimportant to ask the scholars for help. It would interrupt them from what they were doing and would take up their time for something that is so trivial. He had compassion for others, so he may not want to want to do that. And he wasn't selfish or possessive of things. He might let Devadatta have the pen, or at least let him borrow it for a while.

When we have a disagreement, sometimes it isn't worth shouting and getting upset. If our argument becomes loud, it disturbs others around us.

Remember to have compassion for those around us – not only for our parents and other people, but also for pets. No one wants to hear loud quarrelling!

Also, if the argument leads to anger and hurt feelings, we may lose our friendship with the person we're arguing with.

On the other hand, some people are very confrontational by nature – they argue and quarrel over all kinds of things and won't stop until they win. Engaging in arguments with them is a waste of time and energy, and doesn't end well.

In all those kinds of situations, if we can't easily come to an agreement, we can just leave or let the other person have what they want.

Can you think of any other people we should avoid arguing with?

Parents and teachers. Usually, they are trying to guide us with love and good intentions, and arguing with them is very often a mistake.

For example, when we argue to avoid doing something that we should do, or when we try to force a parent to give us something we want, we probably don't have any good reason to argue.

In some situations, it's very important to argue.

Why did Prince Siddhartha think it was important to argue with Devadatta?
Because a living being – the swan - would be harmed or killed if he didn't argue to defend it.

So, when a person or other living being may get hurt, we should do what we can to defend them, to save them from being harmed. This is an act of compassion. Also, if you may be harmed or abused if you don't argue in your defense, you have a good reason to argue and defend yourself.

There are other situations where it is important to argue – when we need to speak up for what is right, to defend ourselves or others from wrongdoing.

Activity:

In each of the following scenarios, should you argue or keep quiet? Under what conditions is it wrong to argue? Under what conditions is it okay to argue?

1. Your little sister wants to play with your toy. Should you argue and prevent her from playing with it?
2. Your little brother is eating cookies and you ask him to stop eating so many, but he doesn't stop. Should you argue and prevent him from eating them?
3. A student says something insulting to another student. Should you argue with him or her?
4. Your sister drops food on the floor, you point it out, but she doesn't clean it. Should you argue?
5. You and your brother are watching TV and he turns it to another channel. You ask him to put it back, and he refuses. Should you insist that he turn it back to the other channel?
6. You are standing in line at school and a student cuts in front of you. Should you argue?
7. Your brother borrows your clean bike and returns it full of mud, and you ask him to clean it but he refuses, saying that he didn't make it muddy. Should you argue and insist that he clean it?

Suggested Answers:

1. No if you just want to play with the toy or you don't like her to have it. Yes if the toy is dangerous for her.
2. No if you just want to eat or save the cookies for yourself. Yes if you think he may get sick from eating too many.

3. If you think the student was really hurt by the insult, you may say something to point out that insulting is wrong. If he or she argues back, it is best to keep quiet and avoid arguing. If it seems likely that he or she may harm the other student again, then it is appropriate to tell an adult.
4. You can kindly point out the food on the floor again, but if she still does not clean it, arguing probably won't make her do it, but only causes annoyance. You can clean it and discuss it with your parents.
5. Yes if the other channel is violent (harmful). No if you just want to watch your channel. You can kindly agree to watch a show you both like, or a show that you like for some time and a show he likes for an equal time. (But you should not watch too much TV, and only what your parents permit!)
6. If you are last in line and you think the person didn't notice you, you can politely say "I'm in line also." If others are in line behind you, they may be unhappy if you allow him to cut in line, so you can kindly say "excuse me, they are all waiting also." If he ignores you, arguing probably won't help, it only causes annoyance.
7. No, it probably won't help anyone to argue. You can discuss it with your parents.