

The Conference of the Birds.

Before you read this, please excuse a little "commercial".

<Commercial starts> Many people are very confused about how to approach "Lightworking" or going onto a spiritual path. E.g. " I have tried staring at a candle but just fall asleep or I can't contemplate my navel until I lose weight and can see it, anyway, I am confused by the language"

At the Centre for Soul Psychology we have developed a series of Personal Projects to help people through any confusion. Thank you and blessings.<Commercial ends> .

The Conference of the Birds.

The Conference of the Birds is a book of poems in Persian written by Farid ud-Din Attar (1119-1193).

The poem uses a journey by a group of 30 birds, led by a hoopoe as an allegory of a Sufi sheikh or master leading his pupils to enlightenment.

Besides being one of the most beautiful examples of Persian poetry, this book relies on a clever word play between the words Simorgh — a mysterious bird in Iranian mythology which is a symbol often found in sufi literature, and similar to the phoenix bird — and "si morgh" — meaning "thirty birds" in Persian.

It was in China, late one moonless night,
The Simorgh first appeared to human sight -
He let a feather float
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere.

Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw,
And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw:
Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide
Return and back into your Sun subside.

The Conference of the Birds metaphorically maps out the journey of the human spirit in its quest for truth. We could say the "Stormy Search for the Self".

The story begins when the birds of the world gather together to seek out their King. Their leader, the hoopoe, tells them that they *have* a King whose name is the Simorgh but that he lives far away and the journey to him is fraught with dangers.

The birds, each of whom symbolize different parts of us (patterns of behaviour or sub-personalities as Assagioli called them), are at first anxious to begin their search, but when they realize how difficult the

journey is, they begin to make excuses.

How often do we procrastinate and choose not to follow our heart's desire through fears and false assumptions.

The nightingale, that aspect of ourselves that is caught up in the purely physical world, cannot leave the rose, the hawk is happy with his position in court serving *earthly Kings*, the sparrow is too afraid even to begin. The hoopoe, representing inspiration, persuades them to continue their search although it will be difficult.

The group formally appoints the hoopoe as its leader. Once the journey has begun the birds ask questions about its course, like the pupil asking the teacher (Hoopoe) questions. The Hoopoe answers using illustrative anecdotes and stories.

The birds then cross seven valleys:

- Search
- Love
- Insight into Mystery
- Detachment/Independence
- Unity
- Bewilderment
- Fulfillment in Annihilation.

At the end of the quest, the birds find that the Simorgh has been with them, guiding them from within throughout the whole journey. The King they sought was non other than *themselves*.

The goal of the Quest is the Self or the Soul. The moment that they discover this depends on the word play: thirty (*si*) birds (*morgh*) are left at the end of the Way and the *si morgh* meet the Simorgh, the goal of the quest.

'Attar began The Conference of the Birds (Mantiq al-tair) with an invocation praising the holy Creator in which he suggested that one must live a hundred lives to know oneself. But you must know God by the deity, not by yourself, for God opens the way, not human wisdom.

'Attar believed that God is beyond all human logic. The soul will manifest itself when the body is laid aside. One cannot gain spiritual knowledge without dying to all things. Not necessarily physical dying, but the letting

go of false assumptions, negative emotions and fears.

When the birds assemble, they wonder why they have no king. The Hoopoe presents herself as a messenger from the invisible world with knowledge of God and the secrets of creation. She recommends Simorgh as their true king, saying that one of his feathers fell on China.

The Nightingale says that the love of the Rose satisfies him, and the journey is beyond his strength; but the Hoopoe warns against being a slave of passing and transient love that interferes with seeking *self*-perfection or communication with the Soul.

The Parrot longs for immortality in the physical world and the Hoopoe encourages the Peacock to choose the whole.

The Duck is too content with water to seek the Simorgh.

The Hoopoe advises the Partridge that gems are just colored stones and that love of them hardens the heart; she should seek the real jewel of the quality of energies of the heart.

The Humay is distracted by ambition, and the Owl loves only the treasure he has found.

The Hoopoe reprimands the Sparrow for taking pride in humility and recommends struggling bravely with oneself. How often do we justify spiritual inaction through convincing ourselves that we are not worthy of happiness and joy?

The Hoopoe says that the different birds are just shadows of the Simorgh. If they succeed, they will not be God; but they will be immersed in God.

If they look in their hearts, they will see the divine image. All appearances are just the shadow of the Simorgh. Those who love truly do not think about their own lives and choose to put aside some desires for the greater good.

Those grounded in love and kindness, let go of dogmatic faith, religion and churches as well as unbelief. One must hear with the ear of the mind *and* the heart. The voice of our intuition our "inner tutor", our inner wise person, our Soul.

A total of 22 birds speak to the Hoopoe or ask questions about the journey. Short anecdotes are told to illustrate the Hoopoe's points. The Hoopoe says that it is better to lose your life than to languish miserably.

The Hoopoe says,

So long as we do not die to ourselves, and so long as we continue to over identify with someone or something, we shall never be free.

Dying to ourselves means letting go of negative attachments. For example

the attachment to fear. We can do this simply by looking at the language we use: words are after all symbols that carry an emotive charge. Instead of saying, "I am a frightened person or I am very afraid" we can try "At times I have a lot of fear". There is a subtle change of energy.

The spiritual way is not for those who are completely controlled by exterior life, however we can all choose to start the process of "letting go of attachment".

You will enjoy happiness if you succeed in withdrawing from attachment to the world. Whoever is merciful even to the merciless is favored by the compassionate. It is better to agree to differ than to quarrel.

One of the easiest routes to spirituality is to practice Kindness. The Universal Law of Reflection states simply that what we put out, we get back. Maybe not immediately and not obviously, but if we practice kindness it will come back. This includes being kind to ourselves, a practice that our organized religions have taught us is wrong. This is a distortion. Jesus said "Love each other as yourself" **not** "Love each other *instead* of yourself"

The Hoopoe warns the sixth bird against the dog of desire that runs loose and uncontrolled. Every vain desire can become a demon, and giving in to one begets a hundred others. The lesson is to be aware of our desires and consciously *choosing* whether or not to satisfy them, instead of being driven by them. It is very important to differentiate between what "what we want" and "What we need". They are very different things. This type of discernment is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

The Hoopoe also says that if you let no one benefit from your gold, you will not profit either; but by the smallest gift to the poor you both benefit. Once again this is the Law of Reflection in action.

She says,

Good fortune will come to you only as you give. If you cannot renounce life (attachment to physical wants), completely, you can at least free yourself from the love of riches and honors.

A pupil becomes afraid in facing a choice between two roads, but a teacher helps the student to get rid of fear so that conscious choices can be made to follow either road. This is the true use of the Will.

The Hoopoe tells the eighth bird that only if death ceases to exercise power over creatures would it be wise to remain content in a golden palace.

The ninth bird is told that sensual love is a game inspired by passing beauty that is fleeting.

The Hoopoe asks what is uglier than a body made of flesh and bones. It is better to seek the hidden beauty of the invisible world, the Soul.

An anecdote about Jesus yields the following lesson:

Strive to discover the mystery before life is taken from you. If while living you fail to find yourself, to know yourself, how will you be able to understand the secret of your existence when you die?

The Hoopoe advises the eleventh bird that giving yourself over to pride or self-pity will disturb you. Since the world passes, pass it by, for whoever becomes identified with transient things has no part in the lasting things.

The suffering endured is made glorious and is a treasure for the seer, for blessings will come if you make efforts on the path. How often do we give in to the part of ourselves that likes to play the *victim* and we never go anywhere.

The fifteenth bird is told that justice is salvation, and the just are saved from errors. Being just is better than a life of worship. Justice exercised in secret is even better than liberality; but justice professed openly may lead to hypocrisy. We need to let go of being "judgmental of others and of ourselves. We all have an internal "critic" who needs to be given a rest and will probably appreciate it.

We often see faults in others because we cannot love ourselves. When we understand real love and practice kindness, the faults of those near us appear as good qualities. When you see the ugliness of your own faults, you will not bother so much with the faults of others. Very often we "project" our own faults onto others.

The journey of the birds takes them through the seven valleys of the quest, love, understanding, independence and detachment, unity, astonishment, and finally poverty and nothingness.

In the valley of the quest one undergoes a hundred difficulties and trials. After one has been tested and become free, one learns in the valley of love that love has nothing to do with reason.

The valley of understanding teaches that knowledge is temporary, but understanding endures. Overcoming faults and weaknesses brings the seeker closer to the goal. In the valley of independence and detachment one has neither desire to possess nor any wish to discover.

To cross this difficult valley one must be roused from apathy to renounce inner and outer attachments so that one can become self-sufficient. In the valley of unity the Hoopoe announces that although you may see many beings, in reality there is only one, which is complete in its unity. We are all part of that Being and that being is part of us.

As long as you are separate, good and evil will arise; but when you lose yourself in the divine essence, they will be transcended by love. When unity is achieved, one forgets all and forgets oneself in the valley of astonishment and bewilderment.

The Hoopoe declares that the last valley of deprivation and death is almost impossible to describe. In the immensity of the divine ocean the pattern of the present world and the future world dissolves.

As you realize that the individual self does not really exist except as part of the greater whole, the drop becomes part of the great ocean forever in peace.

Out of thousands of birds only thirty reach the end of the journey. When the light of lights is manifested and they are in peace, they become aware that the Simorgh is themselves.

They begin a new life in the Simorgh and contemplate the inner world.

Simorgh, it turns out, means thirty birds; but if forty or fifty had arrived, it would be the same. By annihilating themselves gloriously in the Simorgh they find themselves in joy, learn the secrets, and receive immortality.

As long as we hold onto our self-pride and vanity, we will not reach the heights of immortality. 'Attar concluded the epilog with the admonition that if you wish to find the ocean of your soul, then die to all your old life and then keep silent. Let go of attachments.

To help with this Roberto Assagioli left a series of wonderful exercises that help to make this path accessible. Please go back to the "Commercial" at the beginning.

