

The Spider's Thread

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translated from the Japanese by Edwin McClellan

ONE DAY THE LORD BUDDHA was taking a walk by the edge of the lotus pond in Paradise. The lotus flowers blossoming in the pond were white as pearls, and an indescribably delicate fragrance, rising from their golden stamens, filled the air, never ending. The hour in Paradise was perhaps early morn.

Then the lord Buddha paused, and through a clear patch of water between those lotus flowers that covered the surface of the pond, he looked at the scene below. At the bottom of the lotus pond in Paradise was Hell, and through the crystal-clear water could be seen, as though in a peep-show, such sights as the River of Death and the Mountain of Needles.

And almost immediately the lord Buddha noticed a man named Kandata, writhing in the midst of other sinners. This man Kandata had been a great thief, and had done many wicked deeds on earth, killing men and burning houses. Yet even he had once acted with kindness. One day, when walking through a thick forest, he saw a little spider crawling across his path. He lifted his foot, and was about to crush it to death, when he suddenly changed his mind. "No," he said to himself, "I must not. Even a little creature such as this has life, and to kill it without cause would be a great pity." And so he spared the life of the spider.

The lord Buddha, as he looked at the scene in Hell, remembered Kandata's kind-

ness to the spider; and he thought that he should save Kandata if he could, in return for his one good deed. Fortunately, beside him, on a lotus leaf the color of dark jade, a spider of Paradise was weaving a silvery web. The lord Buddha picked up the spider gently, and then began to let it down between the pearl-white flowers, straight towards Hell far beneath.

Meanwhile, Kandata, with other sinners, was struggling to keep afloat in the Lake of Blood, which was in the lowest depths of Hell. All was darkness, except for an occasional, ghostly glimmer of half-light coming from the fearful Mountain of Needles. The quiet was like that of a graveyard, and the only sound that could be heard was the faint sighing of the sinners. Perhaps those that had come so far down in Hell had gone through too many torments to have any strength left for loud cries of self-pity. And in the Lake of Blood, even the great thief Kandata could only writhe and choke like a dying frog.

But it so happened that Kandata, in the midst of his suffering, raised his head and looked towards the sky above the lake. And he saw, descending gradually towards him in a straight, shimmering line, as though fearful of being seen by man's eyes, the silvery thread of the spider. It seemed to come from far, far above, through the silent darkness. Kandata clapped his hands for joy. Surely, he thought, if he could once get hold of the thread, and climb far

enough, he would eventually get out of Hell. With luck, he might even reach Paradise. And then, he would no more be chased up the Mountain of Needles, or be pushed down into the Lake of Blood.

With this hope in his heart, he reached for the thread, and grasping it firmly with both hands, he began to climb up, up, and up, with all his might. Having once been a burglar, he was a skilful climber.

But the ascent was by no means an easy one, for thousands of miles separated Paradise from Hell. After a time, Kandata grew very tired, and could climb no more. Reluctantly, he paused to rest, and still clinging firmly to the thread, he looked down into the depths below.

He must have come a long way up indeed, for already, the Lake of Blood was no longer visible, and even the top of the dully gleaming Mountain of Needles was beneath him. At this rate, he thought, getting out of Hell might not be so difficult after all. In a tone of voice he had not used for many a year, he cried, "Good, good!" and began to laugh. Then suddenly he espied far below a procession of sinners, numberless as a column of ants, coming after him up the spider's thread. For a while, Kandata, struck dumb with amazement and fear, could only stare open-mouthed at the scene. How could such a thin spider's thread, which seemed too fragile to bear the weight of one man, bear the added burden of so many others! And if the thread did break, he would drop straight back into Hell. And as such frightening thoughts passed through his mind, hundreds, nay thousands, more sinners were crawling out of the darkness of the Lake of Blood, and were climbing up the thread. Unless Kandata stopped them, the thread would surely break in the middle, and they would all fall.

And so Kandata with a loud voice began to scream at his fellow-sinners. "Listen to me, you sinners! This spider's thread is

mine! Who said you could come up after me? Get off! Get off!"

It was at this moment that the spider's thread, which until then had shown no signs of breaking, snapped just above Kandata's clinging hands. Spinning round and round through the air like a top, Kandata's body plunged into the darkness.

All that now remained in the moonless and starless sky was the thin thread of the spider of Paradise, shimmering softly in the dark.

The lord Buddha, standing by the lotus pond of Paradise, saw all that passed below. And when at last the body of Kandata had sunk like a stone to the bottom of the Lake of Blood, he resumed his walk, sadly.

There was probably much pity in the lord Buddha's heart for Kandata, who was sent back to Hell for his heartlessness.

But the pearl-white flowers in the lotus pond of Paradise, innocent of wickedness or sorrow, swayed gently about the feet of the lord Buddha, and from the golden stamens, there came the same delicate fragrance, filling the air as always. The hour in Paradise was perhaps near noon.

Ward Two: Promenade

At sundown a slow procession lurches
Up to bed: some grin, some
Frown framing contortions childlike,
The faces of most are blank; none talk.
Some slump and shuffle and others mince
Arthritic with age, inching painfully.
One runs pell-mell.

There are stragglers loathe to leave
One vacant place for another; or wishing
To breathe and bask in the twilight air:
One night I saw a gnome move
Unhurried through the gray half-light.
He carried upon his back I thought
A lute, as the troubador goes

Sadly from beside his love.

JOHN LOGAN