

Conversation between a Sage and an Unenlightened Man

<http://nichiren.info/gosho/Conversation-1.htm>

HAVING received life, one cannot escape death. Yet though everyone, from the noblest, the emperor, on down to the lowliest commoner, recognizes this as a fact, not even one person in a thousand or ten thousand truly takes the matter seriously or grieves over it. Suddenly confronted with evidence of the impermanence of life, we may be frightened at the thought that we have remained so distant from Buddhism and lament that we have been too engrossed in secular affairs. Yet we assume that those who have preceded us in death are wretched, and that we who remain alive are superior. Busy with that task yesterday and this affair today, we are helplessly bound by the five desires of our worldly nature. Unaware that time passes as quickly as a white colt glimpsed through a crack in the wall, ignorant as sheep being led to the slaughter, held hopeless prisoners by our concern for food and clothing, we fall heedlessly into the snares of fame and profit and in the end make our way back to that familiar village in the three evil paths, where we are reborn time after time in the realm of the six paths. What person of feeling could fail to grieve at such a state of affairs, or could fail to be moved to sorrow! Alas! Neither young nor old know what fate awaits them—such is the way of our saha world. All those who meet are destined to part again—such is the rule in this floating world we live in. Although none of this had just struck me for the first time, [I was appalled at] seeing all those who took early leave of this world in the beginning of the Shoka era. Some of them left little children behind them, while others were forced to abandon their aged parents. How sad their hearts must have been when, though still in the prime of life, they were obliged to set off on their journey to the Yellow Springs. It was painful for those who departed, and painful for those left behind. The king of Ch'u's passion for the goddess remained as a wisp of morning cloud, and Liu's grief at remembering his meeting with the immortal visitor was consoled by the sight of his descendants of the seventh generation. But how can a person like myself win release from sorrow? I find myself recalling the poet of old who hoped that because he was a humble-hearted dweller in the mountains he might be free of such sadness. Now, gathering together my thoughts as the men of Naniwa gather seaweed to extract salt, I give them form with my writing brush as a memento for people in later ages. How sad, how lamentable it is! From the beginningless past, we have been drunk on the wine of ignorance, reborn again and again in the six paths of existence and the four forms of

birth. Sometimes we gasp amid the flames of the hell of burning heat or the hell of great burning heat; sometimes we are frozen in the ice of the hell of the blood-red lotus or the hell of the great blood-red lotus. Sometimes we must endure the hunger and thirst that torment those in the realm of hungry spirits, for five hundred lifetimes not so much as hearing the word "food" or "drink." Sometimes we suffer being wounded and killed in the realm of animals, the wounding and killing that occur when the small are swallowed up by the large, or the short engulfed by the long. Sometimes we face the contention and strife of the realm of asuras; sometimes we are born as human beings and undergo the eight sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, death, the pain of parting from loved ones, the pain of encountering those whom we hate, the pain of failing to obtain what we desire, and the pain that arises from the five components of body and mind. And sometimes we are born in the realm of heaven and experience the five signs of decay. And so we go round and round like a cartwheel in this threefold world. Even among people once related as father and child, parents reborn do not know that they were parents, or children that they were children; and though husband and wife re-encounter each other, they do not know that they have already met. We go astray as though we had the eyes of sheep; we are as ignorant as though we had the eyes of wolves. We do not know our past relationship with the mother who gave us birth, and we are unaware of when we ourselves will succumb to death. And yet we have obtained birth in the human world, something difficult to achieve, and have encountered the sacred teachings of the Thus Come One, which are rarely to be met. We are like the one-eyed turtle finding a floating log with a hole in it that fits him exactly. How regrettable it would be, then, if we did not take this opportunity to sever the bonds of birth and death, making no attempt to free ourselves from the cage of the threefold world! Then a wise man appeared and addressed the unenlightened man, saying: "You are quite right to lament as you do. But those who understand the impermanence of this world in this way and turn their hearts to goodness are rarer than the ch'i-lin's horns, while those who fail to understand and instead give themselves to evil thoughts are more numerous than the hairs on a cow. If you wish to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and to quickly free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death, then I know of the finest doctrine that there is for such a purpose. If you wish, I will explain it to you so that you may know of it."