

***The Conference of the birds*** is a Persian philosophical allegory of the soul's journey to the divine. It is written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by the Persian Sufi mystic and poet, Farid ud-Din **Attar**.

The Conference of the Birds begins when the birds of the world gather at a summit in order to seek their rightful king. They turn to the wise hoopoe for guidance, who tells them that they should acknowledge the Great Simurgh (or phoenix as it is known in the west) as their king.

In Persian mythology, hoopoe is the symbol of the wise man or the Master who leads his pupils to wisdom and enlightenment. And Simurgh is the legendary bird which resides in the palace at the peak of Mount Qaf which is a circular mountain that surrounds the Earth. Simurgh represented the union between the Earth and the sky, serving as a mediator and messenger between the two.

Any bird who wishes to meet Simurgh, should start a journey and cross the seven valleys. The group of birds starts the journey to cross seven valleys but that journey to Simurgh's court is long and difficult and filled with trials and tests.

Each bird is a moral symbol of human behavior and represents a human fault which prevents human kind from attaining enlightenment. For example, the **nightingale** is too in love with the rose to go on the journey. While he stares transfixed at his love, he fails to acknowledge his love's short life makes him far less likely to ever want to seek out eternal greatness in the Simurgh. The **peacock** whose main claim to fame is his beauty. He claims that he was made by the painter of the world and his pride lies with his external beauty. The **peacock** wishes to return to paradise from where he was banished. The **Partridge** is too attached to earthly treasures. He is so desperate for shiny objects that have superficial material worth instead of looking for the eternal which embodies spiritual wealth. The **Duck** is too proud of her purity. The duck presents herself as pious and pure, with her prayer rituals and purity of always washing herself in the water. The **Hawk** is too proud of its social standing as the bird of kings. The Hawk chooses to fixate upon worldly glories. The **Finch** claims to be too frail to go on the journey. The bird's excuse is that he is too weak to fly but he has no courage to leave his safe place. The **owl** is too attached to his hidden treasures. He constantly wants to guard the precious materials that he has found. And the **Parrot** represents a person who is too proud of his spirituality.

At first, the birds are excited to embark on this quest, but begin to make excuses to stay behind when they realize the quest's difficulty. "Since Love seemed easy at first, but soon difficulties occurred."

The hoopoe addresses each of their hesitations, fears, vanities, and questions with stories and examples that counter each of their individual concerns. The birds formally adopt the hoopoe as their leader, and the hoopoe describes the seven valleys they must cross in order to reach the Great Simurgh's court.

These valleys are as follows:

1. Valley of the Quest, where the birds (or the pilgrims or aspirants) undergo a hundred difficulties and trials to cast aside all dogma, belief, and unbelief and open their minds to possibilities.
2. Valley of Love, where they must abandon reason and embrace passionate love with a full heart. In the valley of Heart, one learns that love has nothing to do with reason.

3. Valley of Knowledge, where the birds must accept the uselessness of worldly knowledge and open their minds to a new way of thinking. This valley teaches that knowledge is temporary, but understanding endures. Overcoming faults and weaknesses brings the seeker closer to the goal.
4. Valley of Detachment, where all desires and attachments to the world are given up and the assumptions of the nature of reality must vanish. To cross this difficult valley, one must be roused from apathy to renounce inner and outer attachments so that one can become self-sufficient.
5. Valley of Unity, where the birds realize that everything is connected and that the divine power of the Beloved is beyond everything, including harmony, multiplicity, and eternity. 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. 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.
6. Valley of Wonderment, where the birds are entranced by the beauty of the Beloved, and become perplexed and in awe of the beloved, which allows them to realize everything they knew before this point was meaningless.
7. Finally, the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness (or let's say no-thingness), where the self disappears into the universe and the birds or pilgrims become timeless and are no longer confined by linear time. 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, the drop becomes part of the great ocean forever in peace and joy.

When the birds hear the description of these valleys, they bow their heads in distress. Some even die of fright right then and there. But despite their apprehensions, they begin the great journey. On the way, many perish of thirst, heat or illness, while others fall prey to wild beasts, panic, and violence. Many birds drop out of the journey one by one, claiming that they are not able to bear the journey or that the differences between them are too great to overcome. However, the wisest bird, Hoopoe, convinces them to continue the journey, advising them to focus on the integrity and ignore the conflicts between them. In the end, out of thousands of birds, only thirty birds remain in the group as they reach Qaf, the dwelling place of Simurgh. The hoopoe guides them to a lake, where they see the Simurgh in their own reflections. All they discover is a water lake in which they see their own image. The Great Simurgh, and the divine leadership they were seeking, was within them all along. What they were looking for, exists within their collective self and in the totality of all things.

When the light of lights is manifested and they are in peace, they become aware that the Simurgh is them. They begin a new life in the Simurgh and contemplate the inner world. By annihilating themselves gloriously in the Simurgh they find themselves in joy, learn the secrets, and receive immortality. So, as long as we do not realize our nothingness and do not renounce our self-pride, vanity, and self-love, we will not reach the heights of immortality.

It is worth mentioning that Simurgh has two parts or syllables in Persian. One is Si which means number 30 and Murgh which means bird in Persian, so together Simurgh means thirty birds! [Si (thirty)+murgh (bird)]. In this story Simurgh is referring to the number of the birds that endured the journey. But if forty or fifty had arrived, it would be the same.

Let's read some verses from the poetry;

*O my heart, if you wish to arrive  
at the beginning of understanding,  
walk carefully.*

*To each atom there is a different door,  
and for each atom there is a different way  
which leads to the mysterious Being,  
of whom I speak...*

*If Simorgh unveils its face to you, you will find  
that all the birds, be they thirty or forty or more,  
are but the shadows cast by that unveiling.  
What shadow is ever separated from its maker?  
Do you see?*

*The shadow and its maker are one and the same,  
so get over surfaces and delve into mysteries.  
Their life came from that close, insistent sun  
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.  
There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw  
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe  
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend  
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end.*

*They see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare,  
And see a second Simorgh standing there;  
They look at both and see the two are one,  
That this is that, that this, the goal is won.  
Then, as they listened to the Simorgh's words,  
A trembling dissolution filled the birds–*

*The substance of their being was undone,  
And they were lost like shade before the sun;  
Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.  
The Simorgh ceased to speak, and silence reigned.*

**Attar**