The Spider's Thread
Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Once the Buddha was strolling through a garden (presumably in Paradise), when he stopped and looked into a pond. Between the lotus flowers and lily pads he could see through the water and into Hell. The Buddha's gaze rested upon a single individual, Kandata, who was quite a terrible criminal during his lifetime but did have one good moment.

The Buddha was able to see into Kandata's lifetime to a moment when Kandata was about to step on a spider. Suddenly, Kandata had a change of heart and decided that the spider had just as much a reason to live as any other creature and decided it was not fair to smoosh the spider without reason.

Seeing this moment in Kandata's life, when the criminal demonstrated Buddhist compassion, the Buddha lowered a spider thread from Paradise, way down into the depths of Hell, inviting Kandata to be saved.

Kandata reached for the spider thread and began to climb, but soon realized that below him many others were also trying to climb up the spider thread. Kandata became selfish and demanded that they let go of the thread as it was meant for him and him alone. Suddenly, the spider thread snapped and they all crashed back into Hell.

from Tales of Old Japan
Lord Redesdale

It is no easy task to be a good Buddhist, for the gods are not easily satisfied. Prayer and fasting, mortification of the flesh, abstinence from wine, from women, and from favourite dishes, are the only passports to rising in office, prosperity in trade, recovery from sickness, or a happy marriage with a beloved maiden. Nor will mere faith without works be efficient. A votive tablet of proportionate value to the favour prayed for, or a sum of money for the repairs of the shrine or temple, is necessary to win the favour of the gods. Poorer persons will cut off the queue of their hair and offer that up; and at Horinouchi, a temple in great renown some eight or nine miles from Yedo, there is a rope about two inches and a half in diameter and about six fathoms long, entirely made of human hair so given to the gods; it lies coiled up, dirty, moth-eaten, and uncared for, at one end of a long shed full of tablets and pictures, by the side of a rude native fire-engine. The taking of life being displeasing to Buddha, outside many of the temples old women and children earn a livelihood by selling sparrows, small eels, carp, and tortoises, which the worshipper sets free in honour of the deity.