

Inner Call Podcast #118 'This is not my heart...' May 5, 2021

One of the practices that Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan sometimes taught his students was to say, "This is not my heart; this is the altar of God." It is a form of the external zikar, and like the zikar, presents us with a negation, 'this is not', followed by an affirmation, 'this is';. This is not, as we usually assume, 'my' heart, a portion of my sovereign territory, a point within the well-defended fortress of 'me,' but it is a space reserved for the Divine, a window opening upon the Infinite.

Perhaps these words give us a sort of romantic thrill, a feeling that lifts us for a moment from our daily humdrum life. Is 'my heart' more special than I thought? But if we look at the phrase closely, if we take it seriously, if we try to live as if our heart were an altar, what would it mean?

An altar is, first of all, a place of focus, that gives meaning. If one wishes, one can feel the presence of God in all of nature, and yet from earliest times people, feeling uplifted by a grove of trees, perhaps, or a mountain top, have built structures of wood or stone to serve as places for worship. There must be a reason for this. The location may be inspiring, but the inspiration that stirs our spirit seeks expression in the erection of an altar. The artistry and space of a cathedral, with all its holy imagery, is meaningless if there is no altar; the thousands of tons of intricately carved stone and wood, and richly coloured glass exist only for that living center.

We could think about this the next time we look in the mirror. The miracle of our body, with its senses and its abilities, and the never-ending dance of our mind, are meaningless if there is no altar, if the heart has not been offered to the sacred.

An altar and what we place upon it belong to the Ideal. This teaches us the essential spiritual lesson of surrender. This is why we traditionally place that which is beautiful on an altar, for as Hazrat Inayat Khan says in the Gayan, "All surrender to beauty willingly..."

Some people keep a small altar in their home, and to tend it each day, perhaps with flowers or incense, or a candle, helps them to tune themselves and the atmosphere around them. If we would tend the altar of our heart with the same care, clearing it of the dust of unwanted feelings, and allowing it to reflect beauty that is not a prisoner of our individuality but that comes from the Infinite, the effect would be indescribably greater. Hazrat Inayat Khan once mentioned meeting a great soul who did not wish to raise his gaze from his own breast out of respect for the light that came from his heart. There we can see one heart that truly became the altar of God – but we are all made for the same purpose, if we only learn to recognize it.