

Inner Call Podcast #132 The meaning of fair trade June 29 2021

When a group of friends met recently to discuss a phrase from the Gayan, some of them expressed surprise, or even shock, to find Hazrat Inayat Khan apparently reducing spiritual matters to commerce. The saying, found in Gayan Talas, is this :

Life is a fair trade wherein all adjusts itself in time. For all you take from it, you must pay the price sooner or later. For some things you may pay in advance; for some you should pay on delivery; and for some later on, when the bill is presented.

The way this is put is all the more surprising given Hazrat Inayat's frequent warnings that the world is in peril because of the increase of materialism and commercialism, but perhaps he chose his words to get the attention of the business-minded.

When we read this – and given the trade-oriented character of our times – we might be tempted to think about how to turn a profit, how to gain some advantage, shaving expenditures here, increasing our margin there, but the phrase does speak of a *fair* trade, meaning even-handed, and Hazrat Inayat is not proposing that we become shopkeepers, monitoring every penny of exchange. Rather, he is using the metaphor of business to illustrate one of the Sufi Thoughts, that in all Creation there is one law, the law of reciprocity. Whatever we receive, we shall give back some day, and whatever we have given out will return to us in one form or another.

This law is the backbone of all religion. Christians know this as the Golden Rule – “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” but it has been taught in every faith and every culture as far back in time as scholars are able to search. An Egyptian papyrus from the Middle Kingdom, now about 4000 years old, gives a version of this same wisdom. In the Zoroastrian religion, believers are taught to gain wealth so it can be given away, for it will not follow you to the next world.

Others in the conversation about the phrase from the Gayan reacted uneasily to the thought of having to ‘pay the price’ – for they have been taught since infancy (and often in vivid and gruesome detail) of the punishments of hell that await all transgressors – and who can say they are free from error? But the saying talks not of punishment but of consequences. If I grasp the thorns of a rose bush, it would not really be accurate to say that the thorns punished me for doing so. Or if I put my finger in a candle, the flame simply acts according to its nature, and we could not say that the resulting burn is the flame's punishment of me for entering its space.

As for our standing before the Divine Judge, we could remember that, yes, there is a law of cause and effect, meaning that what we do and say and think sows seeds, but we must also remember that Divine Love is above all law. In the Quran we are told that God is merciful, and He loves to forgive – if only we are truly sorry. And in the prayer Saum, we say, ‘All powerful Creator, Sustainer, Judge and *Forgiver* of our shortcomings...’

Hazrat Inayat Khan has said that in life we have two possibilities, to be the machine or to be the engineer. To be the machine means to run, without choice, according to circumstances beyond our control, and although most people assume, with fierce pride, that they act with free will, the more thoughtful we become, the more we recognize that our will is not so significant. It may have very little to do with our thought, speech and behavior. Anyone who tries to control their thought even for an hour will recognize this.

If we wish to be the engineer, though, it means understanding the machine, and recognizing the rules by which it functions. We can begin by observing, and learning to apply, the law of reciprocity. It gives a growing sense of justice, and we need that if we ever hope to become an engineer and be entrusted with the switches and levers of the machine.