

Inner Call Podcast #157 Are we there yet? February 25 2022

Imagine that you are on a long train journey, one that lasts not just hours, but days. Scenery rolls past the window, but you have no clear idea of your progress. Perhaps you pass through endless forests, or the sudden dark of long noisy tunnels or wide featureless plains; sometimes the train stands still for no apparent reason. You grow restless, you find fault with your travelling companions, you run out of provisions, you try to distract yourself, your body complains.

This is a picture of how we sometimes experience our spiritual life. We assume that someday we will arrive at our goal, that the train will finally glide to a stop in the station of happiness, we will step down onto the platform, and all problems will fade away like a forgotten dream. Until then, we fret and worry: is this journey taking me anywhere? Have I made a mistake? Did I board the wrong train? Or is there a block somewhere? In me, or in the whole system?

No doubt there is always concern about our spiritual progress, but if experience shows us anything at all, it is that we have no way of recognizing our own condition. Why? Because real progress means forgetting ourselves, and how can we forget ourselves when we are obsessed with our 'status' or our 'level'? We may be standing at the door to heaven, but if we stop to take a selfie, we will discover that the door has disappeared and we are back on earth – or lower still.

To follow a spiritual path is no safeguard against the difficulties of life. We only need to consider the lives of the great souls to see this; the story of Jesus shows that the highest spiritual attainment doesn't take away the harshness of the world. In other words, we should not assume that our spiritual train is going nowhere just because life seems to bring us one problem after another.

If we feel frustrated, if we doubt that we are really going forward in our search, then there are two places to put our attention. The first is to ask ourselves if we have really done all we can to progress. Hazrat Inayat Khan used the image of digging in the earth to find water. The closer we come to the goal, the more muddy does the earth become – and some people, disgusted by the mess and feeling discouraged, say 'it is getting worse, not better!' and give up. But if we would persevere, we would in time release the stream that would wash away the dirt and refresh us. Needless to say, that mud does not stand for our outer problems, but the dense layers of attitudes and attachments beneath which our living heart is buried.

And the second place to look if we feel that we are lost in limbo is toward what we hold as our divine ideal. If our ideal remains a distant concept, a token to which we pay lip-service, but which we otherwise neglect, then we will feel that we are alone on our journey, and that is a difficult state. Then we are like Baron von Munchausen, struggling to lift ourselves up out of the swamp by pulling on our own topknot. If we want to make our ideal more present for ourselves, we should try invoking it – however we picture it – as all-pervading love or as light or as infinite life, for example – invoking it whenever we face an obstacle. In Gayan Alapas we find this: God is the answer to every question. We should look for the divine answer, then. The more living our ideal becomes, the more meaning the journey will have and the more we will enjoy it.