Developing Inner Strength for Life's Challenges:
The Teachings of Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan on Self-Mastery
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I know you are busy people with a lot going on, with important things to do. So, why would I offer you an allegedly profound spiritual teaching telling you that if you have a tangled piece of string you should NOT get a pair of scissors to cut it so that you can move on to what is really important? *NO, you should put everything aside, and sit there and untangle that knot.*

Taken literally, taken as an absolute, it seems absurd. Taken as a metaphor and as an example, it can speak to our lives.

Sometimes the effort of striving for something, the concentration and skill developed in that process, and the satisfaction of completing the task successfully far outweigh the value of the thing itself. Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan believed that all efforts at self-mastery had an inner, spiritual reward, even in things that seem quite mundane, because they train the mind and the will.

In our meandering investigation of spiritual practices this year, I hoped that a small taste of Hazrat Inayat Khan's philosophy on this subject might be of value. But before getting further into these teachings on self-mastery, I want to first introduce this figure, whose thought and legacy have been deeply influential in my own life and that of many others.

He was born in India, in 1882, to a family of respected musicians. Following in the pattern of his family, Inayat Khan developed considerable skill at the Vina, a classical plucked-string instrument. His early life was dedicated to this path, and he rose to acclaim as one of India's most subtle musical masters.

But he had a profound spiritual longing. At the height of his musical career, he was drawn to the instruction of the Sufi master Mohammed Abu Hasana, who also recognized Inayat's great potential for illumination. (Sufism is, by the way, the mystical or esoteric aspect of Islam).

In the four years that he studied with Abu Hasana, Inayat Khan attained a high level of spiritual awakening. As Abu Hasana lay dying, he urged Inayat to leave India for the west, and to use his music to make a bridge between the religious cultures of east and west. In 1910, at the age of 28, Inayat sailed for America.

For the next 17 years he traveled and lectured extensively throughout the United States and Europe. His teaching strongly emphasized the essential oneness of all religions. He was also concerned that the western traditions had lost their knowledge of the "science of soul," or "the science of mind," and so he reintroduced to his western audience the methods necessary to develop higher consciousness in humanity.

He eventually settled in France. There he created a school of spiritual training based upon traditional teachings of the Chisti Sufis, yet infused with his own particular vision of the unity of religious ideals and the awakening of humanity to the divinity within. Hazrat Inayat Khan succumbed to influenza in1927 and died at the age of 45.

The school he founded, now known as the Sufi Order International, continues today with several centers in Europe and the US. This is the school and tradition I trained in for a few years prior to entering the ministry.

After his death, all of these oral teachings that had been transcribed were compiled into volumes. One of those volumes was given the title "Mastery Through Accomplishment" by its editors. Containing about 50 lectures, it reveals his interest in the subject of attainment—that is, in a nutshell, how one moves from desire, to purpose, to accomplishment.

I want to return to the reading I shared with you earlier, which came from this collection, and go into its ideas more deeply. But first I think another piece of foundation is important:

*Hazrat Inayat Khan felt it was fundamentally important that his listeners and students understand the roots and mechanisms of desire.*

In Sufism there is the notion of the Divine longing, the Divine nostalgia, called Ishk in Arabic, which pervades all things. It is the longing of all things within the fragmented universe to return to their original oneness, their original unity.

All of our desires, for anything—money, love, worldly possessions, admiration, security, power—stem from our deeper longing for fulfillment, that longing for a return to oneness.

At a certain point—so the teaching goes—one will awaken to the understanding that under all other desires, one's root desire is spiritual in nature. When that happens, the person steps onto the spiritual path in earnest.

Nevertheless, in the meantime, Ishk, Divine longing, still moves all of us, motivates us, even if we feel it as a need for red sports car. And so Hazrat Inayat Khan treated desire—the whole natural mechanism of wanting, imagining, striving after something—as one of the most important of all human faculties, and one of the most important tools to be harnessed for spiritual development.

As an aside, he also offers many teachings on *renunciation* of desire. But, I believe he would say that renunciation is not appropriate unless it is undertaken at the right time, for the right reason, when someone is really ready and has the right attitude. Otherwise, to try to renounce what you still want only pits you against yourself. Better that we befriend our desire, seek to understand it, and harness it for higher purposes.

So, with that background, let's revisit a couple of ideas in the reading:

> An important rule of psychology is that every motive that takes root in the mind must be watered and reared until its full development. If one neglects this duty, not only will you harm the motive, but the willpower becomes less, and the working of the mind becomes disorderly.

I'm guessing we are all familiar with the sense of fragmentation that comes from wanting *this,* but then wanting *that*, or from wanting something and then not wanting it. Fragmentation comes from incompletion, things begun but not carried through, endeavors started but not mastered.

It reminds me of a poem of Rumi's about "spiritual window shoppers" who spend their whole lives in a shop picking things up and putting them down, without ever buying anything. "Buy *something!"* says Rumi. "Start some huge, foolish project, like Noah." Choose something that inspires you and commit to it.

For me the key idea here is that our energy, our power, leaks when we aren't focused or committed. The mind becomes cluttered with things left half-done. So we should follow the advice of the King in "Alice in Wonderland" who said:

> *"Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end: then stop."*

So we have the idea of nurturing each motivation through to its completion. And coupled with that, we have the idea of persevering in small things.

> However small a thing may appear, once claimed, one must accomplish it, not for the thing itself, but for what benefit it gives.

Success in each small endeavor becomes a step toward success in a larger one. This is one of the messages behind the parable of the talents, or the "G's" in the Cotton Patch version, which we heard as the second reading.

Each of the three assistants is given a responsibility that tests his current ability. Each is given a sum of money that he is to steward. Only when each demonstrates the ability to manage what has already been given is he entrusted with more. That's common sense.

One of the guys in the story isn't able to properly steward what he has been given, and so it is taken from him. He actually loses ground. Hazrat Inayat Khan said failure in an endeavor can create a kind of backward momentum. One loses energy from it.

If we encounter failure, which we inevitably will in life, he taught that you should never let the emotional experience of failure enter you. You observe, you learn from the mistake, you make the necessary changes. But one should never dwell upon the sense of failure. Again, it confuses the mind. It dissipates the will.

I have a certain friend who is learning to sight-read music on the piano. He can already play like a demon, but by ear, and he wants to be able to read music. So his teacher is giving him children's pieces to play on the piano. Because he is an adult who has been playing music for years, he wrestles with his own impatience, the feeling of wanting to move on to the big stuff. But he's not ready for the big stuff. And so, he says he is cultivating the Zen notion of "beginner's mind." He is learning to enter fully into these children's pieces, inhabit them, and let them teach him everything that they can. At some point, he will be quite ready for the bigger stuff.

Persevere in small things. Master small things first.

Hazrat Inayat Khan tells the legend of a military leader in India who came from very humble origins. Shavaji was a scrappy young highway robber who made his living by mugging travelers on the road. One day, as he was going to stake out his little piece of highway, he encountered a holy man. Things hadn't been going too well for him lately, so he asked the sage for a blessing in his occupation.

Now, this sage had great powers of insight. He could intuit the future, and he could see into Shavaji, his potentials, his destiny. When the holy man asked him what his occupation was, Shavaji knew he couldn't get away with a lie. He admitted, with chagrin, that he was a lowly highway robber. To his surprise the sage, without judgment, gave him a powerful blessing, after which he began to see a great improvement in his luck and the income from his robberies.

Sometime later, he ran into the sage again, and thanked him profusely for his blessing, kneeling and kissing his feet. But the sage was impatient:

> "Yes, yes, fine, fine, please get up. I have something I want you to do. I'm not satisfied with your rather unimpressive success. I want you to find three or four more robbers and pull together a little band of outlaws so that you will be much more successful."

So Shavaji convinced several other robbers he knew to work together with him. With a band of five, they could attack larger caravans, and soon they were raking the plunder in. Later he returned to the sage to tell him how much more successful his operation had become, and to thank him for his advice. But the sage was again unsatisfied. "Why are you satisfied with just five men? You ought to have a gang of twenty. Then you could really do some business!"

So Shavaji continued to recruit more and more hooligans, and soon they had twenty, then thirty, and more and more, until they became a small army.

But the sage was still not satisfied. "Look at you! You are an army of strong young men. Why do you waste your time in this disreputable business? You ought to do something great with your lives. There are so many of you, you could attack the Moghul strongholds and push them out, so that this country would be able to rule itself."

With these inspiring words, Shavaji awakened to the real purpose of his life. He led his small army of rebels against the Moghuls. Soon a new, independent kingdom was established, and Shavaji was remembered in history as having been a great military leader and founder of the kingdom.

When Shavaji and the sage first met, the sage could have judged and scolded him for being a low-life. Or he could have sent him off on a noble but foolhardy mission before he was ready, and he would have met with swift failure. Instead, he encouraged him to strive for mastery within the very small sphere that was within his reach (dubious though it was). Only after he had attained mastery and success at each level did he encourage him to expand his goal.

The small things can be a microcosm of the big things. We may have a grand and worthy goal before us, and we should keep that ever before us with commitment, and hope and trust. But its ultimate success is begun *right here*. When we enter fully into the small challenge that is right before us, it offers us a whole terrain of experience and growth.

We're going to close our service with the hymn that begins, "Be, Thou, my vision, O God of my heart." Whatever your God-concept is, whether or not you believe in a divine presence, or a personal God or not, we can understand "God of my heart" as "that which I hold as my ideal, that which I ultimately love, that which I'm reaching for, or which I'm willing to dedicate myself to." We all believe in something, draw hope from something. This hymn can be a prayer to that hope, that ideal.

Let's sing together hymn #20: "Be Thou My Vision."

(Closing words)
The courage of early morning's dawning
The strength of the eternal hills
The peace of evening's ending
And the Divine light and love,
Be in us always.

Amen and blessed be.