

THE SUN INTERVIEW

# An Interview With Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan

BY SY SAFRANSKY • NOVEMBER 1980

*Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan is head of the Sufi Order in the West and founder of Omega Institute, which sponsored Cancer Dialogue '80. A Sufi leader since the death of his father, Haznat Inayat Khan, in 1926, he studied at the Sorbonne and Oxford, and under many spiritual teachers in the East. Now in his sixties, Pir Vilayat has in the last two decades overseen the growth of the worldwide Sufi movement.*

**SUN:** What do you do when someone who has cancer comes to you for help?

**KHAN:** The first thing I do is try to put them at ease by talking about diet and new forms of therapy and asking them, of course, what kind of therapy they are using. I don't want in any way to intervene or influence their therapy and I certainly don't encourage them to stop any medical therapy. But I say that there are other factors we have to take into account. Then I start trying to find out what their emotional state is. I don't go by what they say because I'm used to counseling and I'm guided by my intuition instead of my mind. Sometimes people say things and I know they're not saying what's real or they don't know what's real. In the case of cancer patients, they generally can't say what grieves them. And then I try to unravel the . . . well, we call it a psychological problem, but I see it from another angle . . . I see the spiritual problem behind the psychological problem. It's very

difficult to find that, and each case is different. Then what I try to do is to strengthen in them the will to survive or the will to fight back. Sometimes they say they have a fighting disposition — mind you, over-aggressiveness can be just as harmful as too passive an attitude — but they often are people who accept their fate with the idea — “Well, it’s karma,” or something like that. That kind of passivity is often associated with the spiritual attitude. I counter that. It involves a whole different way of thinking to understand that one is also part of the divine freedom and one’s own acts of freedom are expressions of divine freedom. So there’s a whole metaphysical background behind that way of thinking. They’ve got in a rut, and it doesn’t involve just their conscious thinking, but their unconscious, until they really are determined to fight against it.

Then I tell them of the cases of spontaneous remission of cancer, which are very frequent. I get into meditation and work with their self-image. You can’t always just divide up self-image on one hand and the situation on the other — they’re intermeshed. The fear of death is a very big distress; they think they are going to die and they don’t see a way out.

**SUN:** How do you address the fear of death?

**KHAN:** It’s no use to make statements about things one hasn’t experienced because they would say, “Well, what do you know?” Nobody’s come back from death and you can go through all kinds of arguments that confirm that there’s such a thing as life after death and so on, but in the end all the arguments can be countered. There’s no way of arguing that would convince people of life after death; all you can do is communicate your own confidence about it. It’s not argument, it’s your own surety and that has something to do with intuition rather than reasoning. People start out believing their intuition but often they devalue their intuition over time. If you can help them trust that intuition, that’s the way, the only way.

**SUN:** People with cancer — who believe they create their own reality — can feel frustrated not knowing just how or why they created this particular suffering. How can cancer be interpreted as a challenge that’s necessary?

**KHAN:** Everything is a challenge that’s necessary. One can’t see that with one’s ordinary mind. That’s the reason for meditation, because ordinary consciousness is in the middle ranges, it never provides an all-encompassing vision that leads us. Working at the level of mind won’t help. One can say things that sometimes hit the nail on the head. They come from great beings. “To find yourself, you have to lose yourself.” Those are great words. Or my father’s words when he says, “If you could

see everything in retrospect, you'd realize that what seemed to be a loss turned out to be a gain and what seemed to be a gain turned out to be a loss." One can say these things and it depends on just how one says it. One person can say it and he doesn't address it personally, he's trying to moralize. Another person, it comes from the depths. That's the reason why the guru is supposed to be in a very deep state of attunement. What he says comes from the depths rather than from his mind and therefore he touches the soul of a person instead of the mind of a person.



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**SUN:** You asked me before if **THE SUN** is a "new age" magazine. What does the term "new age" mean to you?

**KHAN:** I'll answer that in a very indirect way by saying that what was the new age is now very old-fashioned. So I'm using the term "wholistic age" instead. I think that the new age was associated with the drug scene of the 60's which was a reaction against conditioning of society, and so on. But I think we've gone well beyond that. I think that the result of drug taking is often what I call "conformism to nonconformism."

**SUN:** The term "new age" has been used to describe an era of greater enlightenment on the planet. Does that make sense to you?

**KHAN:** It's not for me to criticize the use of a term. Every age is new. The term "new age" expresses a youthful enthusiasm for new dimensions of realization, therefore, it's a very optimistic word. As I said, the only thing is that the term gets associated with a certain lifestyle and I think that we just have to keep on changing things and improve things and not remain stuck in a certain lifestyle.

**SUN:** Do you feel that there's more spiritual awakening now?

**KHAN:** I think there is, on one hand, tremendous spiritual progress, and on the other hand, a tremendous decadence at the same time. This is a subject of everyday conversation. But what I see is a difference in the mode of spirituality. In the early days, people were much more spoonfed, let's say, conventional, in their spirituality. You see in India a lot of the spirituality is superstition; they've been brought up to think a certain way and feel a certain way. Whereas, it's much more worthwhile to overcome this conditioning and still follow the spiritual path even though you're conditioned in the opposite direction. In **The Koran** it says the angels are conditioned for good and it's no special gift to act in an illuminated manner, for them, but man is superior to the angels because, having the temptation of evil, he is capable of still being heroic and acting for the good. I think it is true there is a much more authentic sense of spirituality than ever before, that's the promising thing — less conformity and less attachment to rituals and forms and absurdities and movements and societies and robes and beards and all the rest.

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